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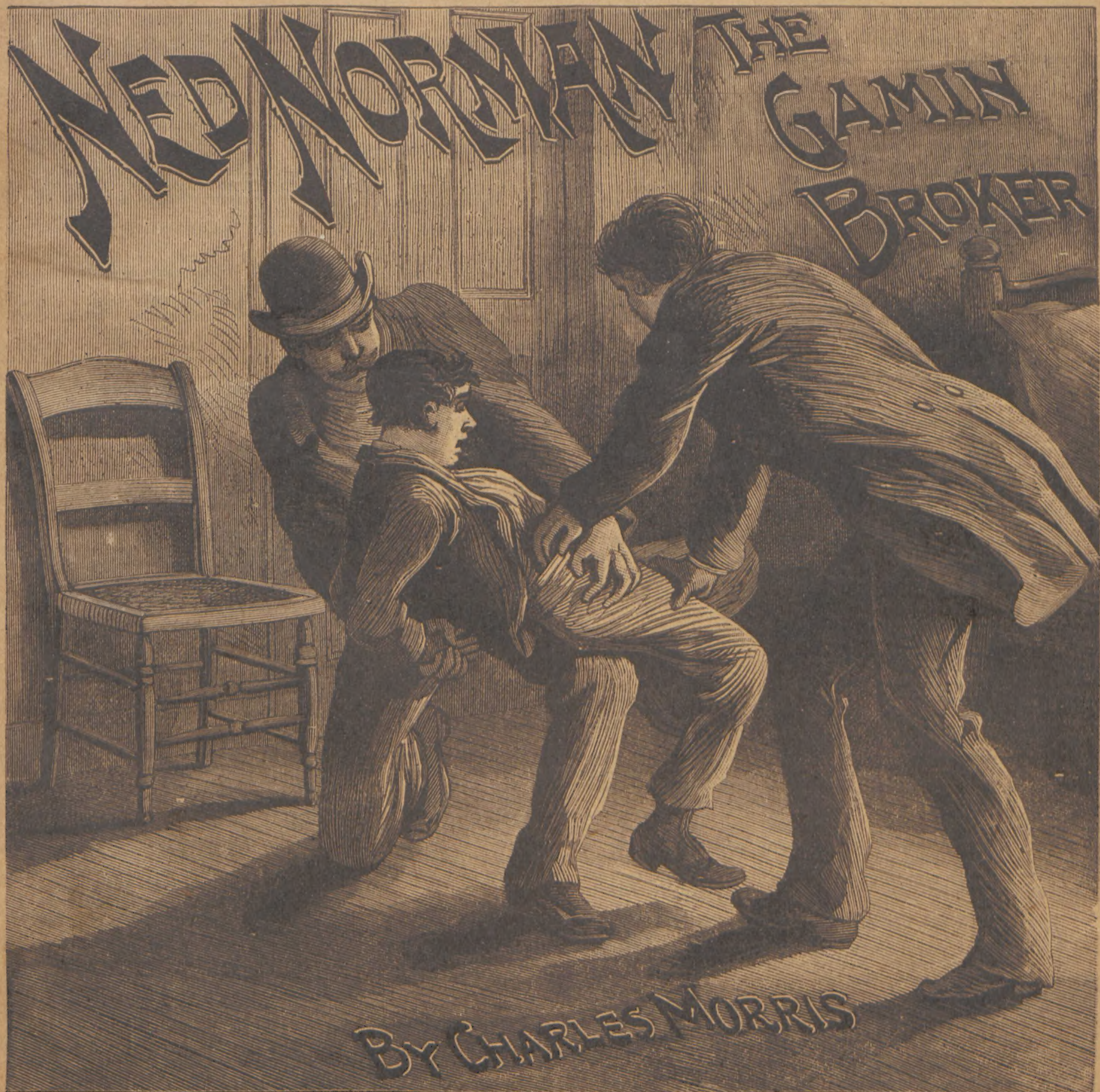
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HE DREW NED DOWN OVER HIS KNEE AND HELD HIM FIRMLY, WHILE GRIP BEGAN TO SEARCH HIM.

Ned Norman, the Gamin Broker;

OR,

The Shake-up of Grip and Gorley.

BY CHARLES MORRIS.

CHAPTER I.

HOW TWO SHARP MEN BLUNDERED.

"LOOK at him. He has been at that for a week. And it is not boy's play either."

"I should say not. Carrying bricks isn't exactly a picnic, and work that means nothing is anything but fun. But, what is it all about?"

"The young rascal annoyed me. You know he has been here every week for the last three months asking for a job, so to get rid of him I sent him to moving those bricks."

"The young rascal has plenty of grit. What are you to pay him?"

"He is to have anything he finds under the bricks. He is welcome to it all."

"The young fool! And he has carried those bricks around to every corner of the yard on such a promise as that? Well, I like his pluck."

This conversation took place in the private office of a business firm on Market street, Philadelphia. The firm title on the sign-board of the store was "Grip & Gorley" and these were the names of the two gentlemen conversing.

Neither of them were men one would have fallen in love with at sight.

They were looking out of the rear window into the yard of the building. Here was a full-grown boy, busily engaged in carrying a pile of bricks from one corner of the yard to another. When he stopped for a moment to wipe the perspiration from his face, it could be seen that he was a rather good-looking lad, with keen eyes, and a generally wide-awake look.

"You'll tire him out, will you?" asked Gorley, with a doubting smile.

"If I don't it will be the first time I ever tried and failed," rejoined Grip, with a grim look.

Several hours passed. The day was well advanced when the boy entered the office, wiping the sweat from his face.

"The job's done," he said stolidly.

"All right," rejoined Grip, looking from the window. "But somehow I don't like the looks of the bricks in that corner. Suppose you shift them again."

"And I'm to have everything I find under them?" queried the boy.

"That's the bargain."

"Jest so; and square is square. I reckon we'll settle up afore I dig in again. Here's my findin's."

He drew from his pocket a dirt-covered, oblong object of pocketbook shape. It gaped open, showing what seemed to be a wad of bank-notes on the inside.

The two men started in surprise. Gorley snatched it from the boy's hand and looked at it closely.

"It's mine," he cried excitedly. "You remember Grip I lost it three months ago, with five hundred dollars in it. You found it under the bricks?"

"Squeezed down into the mud," answered the boy. "Reckon that's how it got lost."

He held out his hand for the pocketbook.

"What do you want?"

"A contract's a contract, I reckon. That's my plunder. Hand it over."

"What! give you five hundred dollars for moving a pile of bricks? Not much! Here's a ten-dollar bill. What do you take me for boy?"

"I did take you for a square man. Looks as if I'd been took in. See here, Mr. Gorley, I don't want the whole of that, and I reckon I'll let you off for a hundred dollars. But I won't take a penny less."

"You won't, eh?"

"No. A bargain's a bargain, and it's all mine, 'cording to contract."

"I didn't make any bargain with you," retorted Gorley, thrusting the recovered treasure into his pocket.

"Mr Grip did, and I judge he's head partner in the firm."

"Now see here, youngster," rejoined Grip, severely. "You've got ten dollars, and that's more than you've earned. Keep that and make tracks."

"Much I'll keep it! I reckon you don't know the kind of stuff I'm made of!" cried the boy, disdainfully throwing the money on the table. "I want my hundred, and I don't leave this place till I git it; that's flat."

He meant it too. He was not going without his money. Mr. Grip threatened, cajoled, blustered, sent for the porter to fling him out, and

tried various means to get rid of him, but he stuck worse than a leech. He was put out of the store several times, but he could not be kept out, and it began to look as if the tiring-out would be on the other side, and that the boy would have too much stay in him for Grip & Gorley.

Several days passed. Day after day the boy returned with reiterated demands for his money. He would not be put off with promises, threats, or offers of less than the full amount of his claim. A hundred dollars was his demand, and not a cent less would he accept.

An event soon took place that decidedly changed the situation. One afternoon Mr. Gorley returned rather hastily from his lunch, with a look of anxiety on his face.

"Back early," said Grip.

"Yes. I made a bad blun— But, where's your sand burr?" looking around the office.

"Worn him out, eh? or paid him off?"

"Got rid of him, anyhow," returned Grip, with some triumph. "We'll see if that bull pup gets the under hold on me."

"How did you manage?"

"I gave him an order for a hundred dollars on Burton & Jones, New York. The little fool took it all in good faith. If he goes to York, which he's got pluck enough to do, I'd like to be at hand and see Burton kick him out of doors. Anything from us to old Burton will be like fire to a sky-rocket," and Mr. Grip laughed unpleasantly.

"Ha! ha!" echoed Gorley, "that's not so bad. Burton hates us worse than he does poison. But, speaking of him—do you know I've done a confoundedly stupid trick? That's what brought me back so early."

"It wouldn't be your first," muttered Grip.

"My letter to Jenkins I flung in the waste-basket, and put this ridiculous scrawl into the envelope to send to Jenkins. It was laying on the table beside my letter."

He pulled out a sheet of paper that was written over in a school-boy's hand.

"It's some of your apprentice's work. He's been amusing himself while waiting for his money. Counting up how much he'd make if he carried bricks for a year, holidays off."

"That would depend on how he made his collections," laughed Grip.

"Anyhow, I discovered my mistake and hurried back, for fearsomebody might be meddling in the waste-basket. It would not pay for that letter to fall into the wrong hands. It was written for Jenkins only."

As he spoke, he drew the waste-basket from under the desk, and looked into it. His face grew suddenly pale as he plunged his hand down and drew up the half of a sheet of paper, which was torn straight across from top to bottom.

"What's this?" he yelled. "Who's been here?"

Grip looked at him, and his face became almost the color of whitewash.

"Why, thunder and lightning!" he screamed, "you don't mean to say it's true? You're not joking?"

"Joking! Do I often joke?"

"Then there's the very deuce to pay! If I'd thought you could be such a fool I'd looked out better what I was doing."

"Doing? What have you done?"

Mr. Grip did not answer. He was whiter than ever, and shaking like a leaf. He hastily opened the door of the office and called out into the counting-room:

"Joe."

The man called came hastily at the excited voice.

"Do you know where that boy lives? The one who has been piling bricks?"

"No, sir. Never saw him anywhere but here."

"Find out in the store if anybody knows."

Joe turned on his heel and walked away, while Mr. Grip closed the door.

His partner caught him fiercely by the arm. His pale face had grown red, and he shook Grip as he hissed:

"What have you done? Tell me this instant, or I'll—"

"What have I done? What you made me," he rejoined, jerking his arm from Gorley's fingers. "I took that sheet of 'waste' paper out of the basket, tore it in halves and wrote the order for Burton on the half torn off. The boy has it now."

The torn sheet dropped from Gorley's fingers and fluttered to the floor.

"Oh Lord!" he gasped, as he fell back into a chair. "You've gone and done it this time, sure! Talk of sending fire to a sky-rocket! Why, if that letter gets into Burton's hands, he'll blow the pair of us sky-high!"

"You've only got yourself to blame," snarled Grip.

"Now don't come that, Grip. That's too thin. We're a blessed pair of boobies, that's the whole story. But you're the biggest. To think of the 'sharpest man in America' sending off a paper without looking at it!"

"Who would expect to find anything but trash in a waste-basket? It's your confounded wool-gathering that has done it all."

"See here, Grip, I suppose it's no use in pot calling kettle black. I'm willing to give in that we've both played the fool, if you'll agree."

"It looks confoundedly like it," grumbled Mr. Grip, with a sour expression on his face.

"It's done; and hard words won't butter parsnips. We must get to work. That boy has got to be stopped."

"After all, it may not be so bad. There's no danger of his going to New York. How is he going to get there without money?"

Mr. Gorley stooped and picked up the half-sheet as he spoke.

"Not if it was any common boy. But that young imp! he'd get to China if he started for it. He's got pluck enough to carry him to the moon."

"It's lucky you tore the paper down the middle," rejoined Gorley, who was looking at it. "If Burton does get it, it will be only half-lines. There's not enough to put him on the track. And our signature's on this half."

Grip snatched the paper and cast his eye over it eagerly. He then shook his head in a doubtful manner.

"It will make him suspect."

"But it is not evidence. And he suspects now."

"We can't take any risks. We must have it back," cried Grip, decidedly. "That boy has got to be stopped and made to hand over, if we have to kill him!"

"Or pay him," suggested Gorley, with a ghost of a smile.

Grip, in reply, thrust the torn sheet deep down into the waste-basket, and stamped his foot fiercely upon it.

"Blast it!" he hissed. "We must throw all this waste into the grate and burn it up. I don't know what else you have put there."

"Nothing else of that sort," rejoined Gorley. "And this piece has no harm in it. All the poison is in the other."

At this moment the door of the office opened, and the man who had been sent out to inquire returned.

"Nobody knows," he reported. "Harley thinks he has seen the boy about Twentieth and Wood streets, but is not sure."

"Twentieth and Wood? Go out there at once, Joe, and see if you can find any trace of him. Ask the boys and inquire at the houses for several squares around."

"What name?" asked Joe.

"Ned Norman; that's the name he gives."

"I'll fetch him, if that's his headquarters," said Joe, as he left the office.

"Don't give up easy," cried Grip, after him. "I want that boy bad."

"What next?" queried Gorley.

"The Directory. And we'd better both try the stores in the neighborhood. The little land leech has been pestering other people as well as us. Quick, too; delays are dangerous."

They both started out on this errand, Mr. Grip forgetting for the moment his intention to burn the contents of the basket. In fact, he was not particularly anxious about the half sheet left; the dangerous half was that he had given to Ned Norman.

If the boy wanted revenge for the treatment he had received from the firm of Grip & Gorley, he had it. If an earthquake had shaken their store, they could not have been in a greater fluster. And this grew greater instead of less when all their efforts proved failures.

The Normans given in the Directory were looked up; but the boy did not belong to any of them. Some of the neighboring merchants had seen enough—too much, in fact—of Ned, but none knew his place of residence.

The day was used up in this inquiry. It was the next morning when they reappeared at the office. Joe had not yet returned to report.

"What next?" asked Gorley.

"Nothing," answered Grip, "till we see Joe. Except to burn those papers."

"What the deuce—" he began; then hurried to the door and shouted. "Come here, somebody!"

A clerk hastily responded. Mr. Grip's voice was too full of business for any delay.

"What became of the waste in that basket?" he asked sternly.

"I don't know, sir, but I think the porter sold all the waste paper in the store last night. The old paper-man comes round Wednesdays, I believe."

"Ask him."

The clerk went out, and quickly came back with the word:

"I was right. He sold it."

"Confound him! Why— But no matter; it's all right. That will do, Mr. Brown."

The young man withdrew, and took care, before going back to his desk, to advise the porter that he was in hot water for selling waste without permission.

"Something in the basket, I suppose, they did not want to lose."

"It's all right, I fancy," inferred Grip. "The paper-mill is as good as the grate. Like dead men, neither tell any tales."

All this was far from sure. When one sets a ball in motion there is no knowing how far it will roll. Something happened which Messrs. Grip & Gorley could not have conjectured.

Their porter was well aware of the temper of his employers. He had been called to account for trifles more than once. Their "very well" did not end a matter always. He might yet "catch fits" about the contents of that basket, and thought it best to be on the safe side.

So that night he sought the den of the old paper-dealer, looked through his gatherings for the day, and was soon able to sort from them the contents of his employers' waste-basket.

"Put this stuff away till your next round," he said to the man. "It may be asked for, and I want to know it is safe."

"All right. I'll take care of it."

It was mid-morning when Joe made his appearance at the store. He at once went back to the private office, where sat his employers talking with one another, with a blue look on their faces. Mr. Grip sprung up on seeing Joe.

"What luck?" he asked.

"I've nailed him."

"You have? Good!"

"His house, I mean. The boy lives with his grandfather, out Callowhill street. Didn't find him, though. He's gone."

"Gone! Where?"

"To New York."

The merchants looked at one another.

"How? By train?"

"No. His grandfather tried to keep him back, but ropes wouldn't hold him. He's a regular young steam-engine when he gets started. He had no money, so he struck out to walk. He'll fetch New York, money or no. The boy that piled them bricks would fetch Hong Kong, if he started for it."

Mr. Grip tapped the floor with his foot.

"When did he start?"

"This morning."

"He'll steal rides to get there. He must be stopped. Joe, would you like a trip to New York?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get ready, then. I want you to go over with me in the two-o'clock Express."

CHAPTER III.

A FOX IN A TRAP.

MESSRS. GRIP & GORLEY were correct in supposing that Ned Norman would reach New York. Wide-awake as the boy was in some things, he was as innocent as a child in others, and really supposed that the paper given him was good for fifty dollars. Fifty dollars was like a fortune to him, and he would have gone to New York on hands and knees for it.

It was about noon of the succeeding day when he landed in the great city beyond the Hudson River. He had walked part of the way, and traveled part of the way on freight-trains. On reaching Jersey City, he had just money enough in his pocket to carry him across the ferry.

Landing in New York he gazed in surprise on the bustle and rush of business in the streets near the ferry, and the great rows of tall business houses leading up into the city. Ere he had gone far he started in alarm as, with whirr and whiz, a train shot past in the air over his head.

"Whew! This beats Philadelphia," he muttered. "There's noise enough here to fit out two cities, and leave some over to spare. That's the Elevated, is it? Whew! but it's a stunner."

But Ned was not the boy to dally. He had business to do. It would be time enough afterward to admire the city.

A short distance further and he found himself in the roar and turmoil of Broadway, the flow-

ing river of wagons, stages, trucks and people almost taking his breath away. His head swam for a moment until he was able to take in the situation.

"Market street ain't bad," he said, "but Broadway takes the cake. This ain't biz, though. Where does Burton & Jones hang out their shingle? That's the pint jist now."

It did not take the shrewd boy long to find out. He had not been given the address, but soon learned where he could see a Directory, and quickly found there the name of "Burton & Jones, wholesale linens and ducks," with street and number.

Armed with this information, it did not take much inquiry to put him on the right track. He had not been more than an hour in New York before he found himself in a narrow street, with lines of tall, stone-fronted warehouses on each side, which he was following with open eyes for the number given in the Directory.

"One, fifty-eight; must be near it now," he muttered. "I thought Philadelfy did business enough for the country, but there's a little done here, too. I s'pose York picks up our leavin's. One, sixty-six."

"Why, hallo, youngster! what in the world are you doing here?"

Ned looked up hastily at the sound of a voice that seemed familiar to him. To his surprise he saw a face which he well knew. It was one of the men in Grip & Gorley's store!

"Hallo, Joe!" he returned, glad to see a familiar face. "What's up? Didn't expect to run across you."

"And I thought you were piling bricks. What brings you here?"

"Biz, that's what. Got a contract. I'm lookin' fer Burton & Jones's store. Ought to be somewhere 'long here."

"What makes you think that?"

"Why, I looked it up in a Directory."

"Nonsense, boy; that's a year old! People move here about every six months. Those folks kept here long ago. I happen to know where they are now, and you're two miles away."

"Is that so? Can you tell me where to find them?"

"I can show you; that will be better. I am going that way. Come along, young chap; I want to have a talk with you."

Without a thought of distrust, Ned accompanied his new friend, chatting eagerly as he went about his adventures in getting to New York.

"And what do you want here?"

This question froze Ned up. He had early been taught not to talk about business.

"I want to see Burton & Jones," he answered. "Got some business with them."

"Very likely," answered Joe, dryly. "You wouldn't walk to New York without. But I judge you must be hungry, from what you say about your rations."

"I'm hollow enough to hold a sheep," rejoined Ned, with an expressive look. "Travelin' does make a feller hungry."

"I'm a little that way, too. We'll go get something to eat, and you can see Burton & Jones afterward."

"I'd sooner see 'em first."

"Nonsense! They're not going to run away. You can't find them without me, and I'm going to lunch before I do anything else."

Business before pleasure was Ned's idea. But he could not help himself, and he was hungry enough to make Joe's offer very tempting. So he trotted on willingly beside him. Little did he dream that his seeming friend had been set as a trap to catch him, and that he was walking into the net of an unprincipled pot-hunter.

Winding through some narrow streets, Joe at length turned into one that was little better than a court, and entered a tall, dingy house, with a drinking saloon sign in front.

Walking into the bar-room, he said some words in a low tone to the bartender, while Ned stood in the rear.

"He said he'd be back in an hour. He's been gone 'most that time now."

"Very well; send us up something to eat; plenty, for we're both hungry."

Leaving the room, Joe beckoned to Ned, and led the way up two flights of stairs to a room on the third floor.

"Grub will be up in a minute," he said. "It's a low place down-stairs, so I thought we'd take our dinner private."

Ned looked around him. It was a grimy-looking room, with chairs and table, and a bed in one corner.

"Are you stayin' here?"

"Yes, for a day or two."

Ere many more words could be said a man

came up with their dinner on a tray. It was coarse but abundant. Ned had never been used to luxuries, and was hungry enough to make a royal banquet on bacon and beans, so he plunged in heartily, giving his companion trouble enough to keep up with him.

"Jerusalem! but that corned beef's good. And them pertaters is jist prime. I never eat anything that went down better."

"Go ahead: don't leave any; it's all got to be paid for."

Ned obeyed orders, and emptied the platters. "There! I reckon I won't eat any more," he said, looking at the bare dishes.

"I wouldn't either, unless you would like to top off on the table."

Ned laughed heartily at this wooden joke. He had eaten himself into the best of humors.

"Haddn't we better toddle on now?"

"Not just yet. It's too soon after lunch."

Joe seemed listening. At that moment there came the sound of steps on the stairs, and his eyes lighted up with satisfaction. The next instant the door opened, and a man entered the room. Ned's eyes opened wide with surprise as he saw him. It was Mr. Grip!

"Hallo!" cried the latter, as if in the greatest astonishment. "You here, boy! Where did you drop down from? I thought you were in Philadelphia."

"I picked him up in William street," said Joe, "and brought him here for lunch."

"Why, you sent me to New York, yourself," rejoined Ned. "I was to come here and call on Burton & Jones."

Mr. Grip looked at him with an aspect of great surprise. Then he burst into a laugh.

"Mercy!" he cried, "you did not take that in earnest? That paper? Why, it was only a sell, boy! I gave it to you to get rid of you for a day or two."

"You did!" exclaimed Ned, opening his eyes. But, he was getting his eyes open in another fashion. Was his meeting with these two men quite by chance? Maybe Mr. Grip wanted his fifty-dollar order back.

"And you came all the way over to New York with that paper! Ha! ha! that's too good! It's too bad, rather. Why, boy, the order isn't worth the paper it's written on."

"Then what made you give it to me?"

"To get rid of your bother."

"Anyhow, I came to New York to give it to Burton & Jones, and I reckon I will."

"It's too bad to bring you here, that's a fact. You ought to have something for your trouble. Give me the paper back and I'll give you twenty-five dollars; that will pay you for your journey."

Ned looked at him closely. He had offered only ten dollars before, for finding the roll of bills. Now he agreed to pay twenty-five for what he called a piece of worthless paper. That was not like Mr. Grip.

Ned grew more suspicious every moment. If Grip was trying to make a fool of him, he would let him see that he was not the stuff they make fools of.

"Twenty-five?" he queried.

"Yes," assured Mr. Grip, taking out his pocketbook, and counting out the money in new bank-notes on the table.

"Tain't enough," decided Ned. "I reckon somehow that paper's worth a hundred dollars. I ain't sellin' below price. I am a paper negotiator now, ye see!"

"Why, you unconscionable young miser! I am offering you tenfold its value."

"I calculate not. Grip & Gorley are business men, and business men don't go back on their word."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Mr. Grip, as if highly amused. "That's a settler. You're learning, boy. Well, lay the paper down there, and I'll make my word good with another twenty-five."

"I reckon not," answered the boy.

"Why not? You don't want a fortune for a scrap of paper?"

"You're two to one. This is a lonely room, away up on the third floor. Come down-stairs where there's folks about, and then I'll deal. I prefer the street for such negotiations."

A cry of anger that sounded like a snarl came from Grip's thin lips.

"You blasted young villain!" he exclaimed. "Do you want to call me a thief? Shut the door, Joe! We will search the hound. He's got to give up that paper, if I have to skin him."

He seized Ned as he spoke. Joe shut the door and came to his assistance. The boy fought bravely, but he could do nothing in the arms of two strong men.

After a minute's struggle, Joe got a firm

hold on his wrists and dragged them behind him. He drew Ned down over his knee and held him firmly, while Grip began to search him with the skill of a detective.

Every pocket was examined. His shoes and stockings were taken off and searched. Every possible hiding-place in his clothes was investigated, but no trace of the paper was found. Ned had ceased to struggle after the first minute, and submitted quietly to the search.

After five minutes' work Mr. Grip gave it up. He looked the boy in the face savagely.

"What have you done with that paper?" he hissed.

"That paper was worth one hundred dollars; its price now is two hundred, and before witnesses," announced Ned, sturdily. "It has gone up 'a value."

"By the fiends! I'll hang you or drown you like a rat, if you don't hand it over! You can have five minutes to decide. If you are not ready to give it up in that time I'll make an end of you."

He walked to the door of the room, followed by Joe, who had released his prisoner.

"You can have it for two hundred, and not a cent less," the negotiator repeated.

"You are in my power, boy, and it will be worse for you if you don't yield. You can't escape from this room. I'll be back in five minutes with a rope, and yonder's the hook you'll hang on."

He pointed to a strong hook in the ceiling, as he closed and locked the door.

Ned picked up his cap, which had fallen and been kicked across the room in the struggle. He seated himself on the bed to think.

"It's squally, but a good deal can be done in five minutes," he said, looking around.

What he did in those five minutes time must tell.

Exactly five minutes afterward the door was unlocked and the two men reappeared. They looked round the room in surprise. No trace of their prisoner was visible. But the bedstead was pushed up close to the window, with the corner of a sheet tied to one of its posts, and the sheet hanging out the open window.

The negotiator had flown!

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE PAN INTO THE FIRE.

THE two men looked at one another with varying expressions. There was surprise in Joe's face, there was dismay in that of the merchant. He knew much better than his man what that lost paper meant.

But there was no time to spend in gazing at each other's face. Every second counted. With a violent oath, Grip sprung to the window and looked out. The end of the sheet reached down to an open window on the second floor below.

"He has climbed down and jumped into that window!" yelled the baffled villain. "There's not a second to lose. Follow me, Joe."

Out of the room he plunged and dashed down the stairs to the room beneath, closely followed by his confederate.

The door of the room stood wide open. A single glance into it showed that it was empty.

"To the street!" cried Grip. "We must head him off. It will be worth a hundred dollars to you, Joe, if you stop him getting to Burton's."

Down the second flight of stairs they plunged and into the street, much to the surprise of the barkeeper, who saw them dash madly past the door of his den.

If they had thought to stop and ask him, he could have told them that the boy they were after had not gone out that way. But they were too full of the necessity of haste to think of this. To their fancy the fugitive was in the street, with a minute or two the start.

Yet they were seriously mistaken. The conspirators had overreached themselves. At that instant, while they were darting in different directions down the street in pursuit, Ned Norman was enjoying a lively dance in the middle of the room they had just left.

How came he there? That can be told in very few words.

Their footsteps had hardly ceased sounding on the stairs before, from under the low bedstead which had been pushed against the window, a slender form crawled.

It was the missing boy.

Ned sprang into the middle of the room, and began the dance of triumph of which we have spoken, though he could hardly stand on his feet for laughter.

"If I ain't come it over old Grip there's no use talkin'," he said, to himself. "I tell you, it was cute to play that little trick with the sheet,

and make him think I'd mosey'd out o' the window. Maybe I ain't as smart as him, but I've done him up brown. He can't have the paper now for less than a hundred, nary time."

He stopped suddenly to listen. Some sounds had come to his ears.

"I reckon these ain't the cosiest quarters in the world," he said. "Better git, 'fore they come shootin' back."

Pulling his hat down over his eyes, he darted from the room, whose door the hasty pursuers had left wide open.

Reaching the narrow entry, he looked and listened. No one was in sight, and no suspicious sounds came from below. He ran lightly to the head of the stairs, and descended them with a rapid step.

He paused again to look and listen. The coast was still clear. Down the next flight he went more cautiously to the first floor. He was within a few steps of the street; the front door opened invitingly before him; but to reach it he must pass the door of the drinking-saloon, and for all he knew his foes might be lying in ambush there.

The boy had grown cautious. He had made up his mind to put that paper in the hands of Burton & Jones, and when Ned's mind was made up it was made up hard. He was taking no chances.

"I never seen a house yet without a back door," he muttered, "and I reckon the back door's my right bower jist 'bout now."

Turning, he followed the passage cautiously backward, listening at every step. He soon found himself in a kitchen with no one in it, and with a door opening into a narrow yard.

From this a gate led into an alleyway. Ned was about laying his hand on the latch of the gate, when he was startled by a voice hailing him from above.

"What are you doing there, boy?"

He looked up. A hard-faced woman was looking out of an upper window.

A glance convinced the quick-witted boy that he was safe. He could be a block away before that woman got down-stairs.

"I'm jist lookin' 'round," he answered, impudently. "Got a notion to buy this place, and want to see if it'll suit my notions."

"You rascal! You've been stealing. Wait there till I get down, or it will be worse for you."

"Yes, I'll wait. I wouldn't think o' not waitin'. That wouldn't be perlit."

The woman had left the window, and was evidently making haste down-stairs. Ned grasped the latch and gave a quick jerk to the gate. It failed to open, and he now saw what he had failed to notice—that it was fastened with a padlock.

Here was an awkward complication. If he attempted to rush back through the house, he was in danger of being caught. What was to be done? He looked at the fence. It was seven feet high. But in the middle of the yard stood an empty barrel.

It was the work of an instant to roll this to the fence, turn it upside down, and leap upon its bottom.

The bottom gave way beneath his feet, but he had caught the top of the fence with both hands just in time to save himself from going down into the barrel.

A spring, a wriggle, a jerk or two and he was waist high with the fence-top. Another strong lift and he had one leg over. He threw the other over and fixed himself in a comfortable seat, just as the woman burst in a fury from the kitchen door.

"You young thief and vagabond!" she yelled. "Come back this minute and give up what you've stole, or I'll hand you over to the police!"

"You didn't never try to catch a coon up a tree, ma'am?" asked Ned, impudently. "You've got to coax 'em down, you know. Can't fetch 'em down with hard words."

"You impudent little villain! Come down, I say!"

"I'd like to 'blige you, ma'am, but I've got very pertickler business. I'll stop on my way back if that'll do jist as well."

As he spoke he lowered himself down the fence, holding on with his hands.

This made the woman more angry than ever. She fairly frothed at the mouth as she yelled:

"Stop thief! stop thief!" and ran back into the kitchen for the key of the gate.

"I don't know but what it's about time to slide," said Ned to himself. "Things are gettin' squallier here every minute."

Loosing his hold he let himself drop to the ground. He found himself in a sort of blind

alley, running in the rear of a row of houses, and opening into a street at a little distance.

Down this he darted, for he could hear the woman running to the gate, still shouting "Stop thief!" with all the power of her lungs.

He reached the street just as he heard her fling the gate open behind him. It was one of the narrow streets of that locality, and was well filled with people.

Ned's first impulse was to run, but second thoughts told him that if he did the woman might raise the "hue and cry" on his track. Stepping into the tide of passers-by, he began to walk onward slowly and carelessly, trusting that his pursuer would not recognize him.

His plan proved a wise one. She ran furiously to the opening of the alley, looked eagerly up and down the street for the form of a running boy, and seeing none stood irresolute, paying no heed to the boy who was walking quietly onward, not ten feet from her.

Ned took good care not to look round, but walked steadily on until he reached an adjoining corner, round which he turned into a neighboring street.

"I reckon I've sold the old woman," he said. "But my, wouldn't she jerked me if she'd nabbed me! I never saw nobody b'ile over worse."

Ned walked on. He was safely out of the den into which he had been entrapped, had thrown his pursuers off his track, and had the coast clear before him once more. He naturally felt jubilant.

"I got my dinner out of 'em, and it's worth a little row for a good dinner," he soliloquized. "There's somethin' mighty queer 'bout that paper that old Grip didn't find," he continued, with a laugh. "He wants it back ag'in the worst way, but he can't have it nary time for less than a cool hundred, and 'fore witnesses. I ain't trustin' him nohow. He says he tried to sell me with it. It looks somehow 's if he'd sold himself. I've come over here to give it to Burton and Jones, and I'm goin' to do it."

He set his teeth in a way that showed he meant business.

But where was he to find Burton & Jones? Joe said they had moved. Had they? Was not that part of the game? If they had, how was he to find them? Why, by asking at their old place.

Ned had made up his mind what to do. The next thing was to do it. Just where he was, or what direction he was to take, he had no idea. But ten minutes' walk brought him out into a wider street. A little inquiry now taught him the way to William street, and before long he was once more in the vicinity of the store he was in search of.

He was walking along carelessly, laughing to himself with some triumph, when he stopped with a start of surprise. Something ahead had caught his eye.

He slipped into a doorway and looked again. Yes, there could be no doubt of it; that must be Mr. Grip's back. And now the person Ned was watching turned and showed him unmistakably Mr. Grip's face.

Thoughts shot quickly through Ned's fertile brain. His foe, having lost him in the den into which he had been trapped, had now put himself on guard over Burton & Jones's store. He was walking slowly up and down. Ned waited till he had turned again, and then hurried away in an opposite direction. In a few minutes more he had reached William street at the other end of the block containing the warehouse of Burton & Jones.

He was more cautious now. He had nailed Grip, but where was Joe? He squeezed himself closely against the wall of the corner building and looked cautiously round. One look was enough. There was Joe, sure enough, on guard over the other end of the block.

Ned drew back, and fell into a deep study. His foes, having lost him, had chosen the best way to find him again, and had placed themselves at both ends of the block through which he would have to pass to reach the place he sought, which now he was sure must be in that block.

But what could they do? It was the open street, with plenty of people about. He could not be dealt with there as he could in a locked room in the third story of a house. He felt for the moment strongly inclined to venture, but in the end gave it up as too risky. Grip was an old bird, and might have some game to stop him.

Ned turned away. He had made up his mind on the instant to give it up for that day. He would come early the next day, and see if the track was clear.

Where he spent that night we are not able to

say. The weather was warm and he was used to outdoor life, so a snooze on a wharf or under a box was no hardship to him. Business had only fairly begun when he again approached the contested locality.

He came up with great care and looked through the street. Neither of his foes were visible. With a chuckle of triumph the boy darted forward, looking eagerly for the number of the store he sought.

He was suddenly checked in his career. A man sprung from a doorway and clutched him vigorously by the arm. There looked down on him the sneering, triumphant face of Mr. Grip.

"So I have found you at last, you young runaway!" he exclaimed. "You will come with me now to your poor mother, whose heart you have nearly broken."

The captive struggled. Some of the passers-by halted and looked on with surprise.

"He is my son, who ran away from home a week ago," explained Mr. Grip. "I have been hunting him high and low."

"It isn't so!" cried Ned, indignantly. "I am not his son, nor no relation to him."

"That won't do," said another voice. "I can vouch for Mr. Nelson that you are his son." It was Joe who spoke. He had suddenly appeared.

"Will some one call a policeman?" asked Grip, as Ned continued to struggle. "I can prove my claim, and wish to take my boy home to his distracted mother."

Ned ceased to struggle. The game of his captor was a well-laid one. If he played it well it was sure of success. The boy was sharp enough to recognize that he was in a scrape.

"All right, I will go with you," he said. "And if you get that paper I hope it will do you good," he thought.

CHAPTER V.

THE CUCUMBERS DID IT.

MR. GRIP'S scheme had been well chosen. Ned was wise enough to perceive that his captor held the winning hand, and that he could gain nothing by resistance. He judged it best to go along quietly, and to trust to chance for an escape from the trap into which he had fallen.

They returned to the building from which he had recently escaped. Mr. Grip watched him like a hawk, and kept a hand on his arm, until they were safely within the entrance hall of this building. Then he turned to speak in a low tone with Joe, still keeping a tight hold on the boy's collar.

Ned seemed submissive. He had taken off his hat, and stood with his eyes cast down, fumbling in his lining. He looked as sheepish as a boy who has earned and expects a whipping, and as if he was fumbling in mere helplessness.

Yet there was something fox-like in the sharp glance he cast on his captor as he withdrew one hand from his cap. In that hand was concealed a closely-folded square of paper. This hand, still closed, he thrust into his pocket.

"Come on, now," said Mr. Grip, while Joe turned and left the house. "You will not get away so easy this time, my lad."

Ned quietly followed him up-stairs. The boy was as demure as a rabbit. But he had not given up. In fact, there was no give up in him. He was all grit from head to foot.

"Hey! there's that dratted boy now!" cried a shrill voice, and Ned's late acquaintance rushed out of a room on the second floor. "What are you doing back here? Want to steal something more?" The termagant seized him by the shoulders and shook him roundly.

"What's all this? Did he steal anything from you?" asked Mr. Grip.

"He tried to, but I chased him off. But he climbed up the back fence and gave me impudence, the dratted young street-rat!"

She shook Ned again as a cat might shake a mouse.

"The back fence, eh? So that was the way you went?" queried Grip.

"Reckon so," answered Ned, stolidly. "Thought you might be waitin' out front, and didn't want to give you no trouble."

"You rascal! I'll give you trouble enough yet!" hissed the incensed captor.

"Come; get!" cried the woman. "I won't trust you here. Be off, while I keep my temper."

"All right. If you don't want my company I don't want yours. I'll git," answered Ned, turning on his heel, and making a dart toward the stairs.

Grip had let go of him in his surprise at the

woman's assault. But he was too keen to be caught napping. He watched the boy like a hawk, and Ned had not made three steps toward the stairs before he was after him with a leap.

He grabbed him by the collar and jerked him violently back.

"That won't do, youngster. That game's too old to play on me. Never mind this boy, ma'am. I'll take care he don't steal anything from you or any one."

"I never stole nothin' from you," said Ned doggedly, as his captor dragged him on. "You done 'bout all the stealin' when you wouldn't pay me my twelve dollars."

"Come, now; and hold your tongue."

The captive was dragged up to the room he had formerly occupied. Once in there Grip locked the door, seated him violently in a chair, and took another opposite him. Fixing his small, gimlet-like eyes firmly on Ned, he sat in silence, watching the wriggling and uneasy boy.

Fifteen or twenty minutes passed, without a word being spoken. Then Ned could stand it no longer.

He gave a sort of war-whoop, sprung to his feet, and began a violent dance.

"Don't want to grow fast and turn into a mummy," he explained. "Ain't got no more bricks you want piled, nor nothin', Mr. Grip?"

Grip continued to watch him sourly and sternly, saying nothing, but not for an instant losing sight of his prisoner.

At this moment there came a step on the floor outside. The door was tried and then shaken.

"Come in!" cried Grip.

"I can't. The door is locked," answered the voice of Joe.

"Yes, yes; I forgot."

He rose and went to the door, losing sight of his prisoner for a single instant.

That instant was enough for the alert and quick-witted boy, who had been all this time waiting for his opportunity. His hand was withdrawn hastily from his pocket, and something was thrown with a quick fling under the bed. When Grip turned his head again, after unlocking the door, his captive was still dancing.

"Hello!" cried Joe, looking at him curiously. "What's the matter with the kid?"

"No matter what. Let him alone till we're ready. Did you get them?"

"Yes."

He opened a bundle which was under his arm and spread out a suit of boy's clothes on the table.

Ned stopped dancing and opened his eyes in surprise.

"Now, youngster," said Grip, with a meaning look, "I'm going to treat you to a new suit of clothes."

"Me?" exclaimed Ned, in seeming delight.

"Yes, you. I owe you some money, and have laid it out in clothes for you."

"That's hokey! I wanted some new duds jist the wu'st kind. Much 'bliged, Mr. Grip," and Ned began dancing more vigorously than ever.

"Call a halt there!" cried Joe. "You're a good deal too previous, young man. Come, strip off your rig and put these on. I want to see how they fit."

Nothing loth, Ned obeyed, denuded himself completely of his well-worn clothes, and put on the new ones, which certainly fit him very well, and gave him a much more respectable appearance.

"Ain't ye got a lookin'-glass handy?" he queried. "I want to take myself in, and see what sort of a lookin' dude I make."

"You are taken in without a glass, if that's what you want," rejoined Grip, triumphantly. "The paper's nowhere about you now, that's certain. And if it's in these clothes, as I know it is somewhere, I'll have it."

"Maybe it's hid in my hair. You didn't 'vestigate that," suggested Ned.

Mr. Grip looked at his hair. It was cut so close that a razor would have had little to work on, and there was not room for a mosquito to hide.

"You want a cowhiding, you reprobate!" cried the irate merchant. "But that reminds me. I forgot to search your cap yesterday." Ned gave a start as if of dismay. "Ha! I touched you there, did I? I judge I've got the best of the game now, my lad. You may go. We don't want you any longer."

"Me? I may go? You ain't in earnest?"

"Yes. Get; slide; vamoose," said Joe. "Vanish before I kick you down-stairs."

Ned started with a show of great haste for the door. On reaching it, however, he turned,

walked back and seated himself in the chair he had recently quitted.

"I calculate I'll stay till grub-time's over," he announced. "You dunno how holler I am. I want some more of them beef and pertaters, they guv us yesterday."

"Go, now; none of your nonsense."

"Nonsense! when a feller ain't had a bite for a whole day and night! I jist ain't goin' without a lunch, that's dead level."

Mr. Grip looked at Joe.

"The youngster must be hungry," said the latter.

"Well, order him up a lunch. We can search these rags while he's eating."

Joe repaired down-stairs, and in a few minutes returned with the materials for a satisfactory meal. It was all cold, but Ned was too hungry to mind that.

He ate like a young hyena, while his captors set themselves to a thorough examination of his discarded clothing. The cap was first investigated—torn to pieces, in fact, in their eagerness—but nothing came from it. Ned watched them from a corner of his eye as he went on eating. There was a look of disappointment on Mr. Grip's face, but he said nothing.

They were about half through with their task when Ned at length rose, having left a desert of empty plates behind him.

"Them was mighty prime. Much 'bliged. Reckon I'll go now, if nobody ain't got no objections."

"Very well. Go," said Mr. Grip.

Ned walked independently toward the door. But he had not reached it before a change came over his aspect. A look of pain distorted his face, he clapped both hands to his stomach and uttered a yell of anguish.

"Ow! ow! ow!" he screamed. "I'm jist full o' blazin' coals! Ow! ow! ow!"

He writhed back and forth over the floor, bent nearly double, and with his hands clasped tightly to his stomach, while his yells of pain grew still louder.

The two men sprung up. Joe ran to him, caught him by the shoulder, and shook him violently.

"What's the matter? What ails you?" he demanded.

"It's them cowcubers! I can't never eat cowcubers! Ow! ow! ow!"

Wriggling from Joe's grasp, he fell on the floor, and rolled and writhed like a person in mortal agony.

"The youngster's got a fit of cramp-colic," said Mr. Grip. "Cucumbers on an empty stomach—I don't wonder. Run down, Joe, and get him a glass of whisky. We don't want him to die on our hands."

Joe hastily obeyed, while the howling boy continued to roll and wriggle. He brought up at length half under the bed. Severe as his pain seemed to be his eyes were wide open and looking over the floor keenly.

Suddenly his hand closed on a little lump of rolled up paper. Then he began to wriggle and howl worse than ever, keeping it up till he was in the centre of the floor again.

By this time Joe had returned, with a glass half full of whisky. He caught the writhing boy by the shoulder, and forced him into a sitting position.

"Open your mouth now. Swallow some of this. It will do you good."

Ned obeyed and swallowed a mouthful of the fiery stuff, though it half-choked him and brought tears from his eyes.

He sat upright, sighing and moaning, but no longer yelling as before.

"That seems to have touched the right spot. Give him some more," said Grip.

Joe forced him to swallow another mouthful. This brought him to his feet, coughing as if he was half-strangled.

"Don't you feel better now?"

"Yes; that kinder fatched the fire; but it 'most choked me."

"Take another sup."

"No, no! I don't want no more. I'm all right now. Guess I'll go," cried Ned hastily, by no means relishing the strong drink.

He walked to the door with an appearance of great feebleness. With the same feeble step he proceeded along the passage, and down the first steps of the stairs, giving a low moan now and then.

But he was no sooner fairly out of sight than a look of triumph came into his face. He drew his hand from his pocket and looked at the rolled ball of paper it held, and then thrust it back with a low laugh of satisfaction.

"It was the cowcubers did it," he said to himself with a sly look.

At this moment Joe called from above.
"Come back here, boy. We're not done with you yet." They had finished their search and found nothing.

"Much I'll come back. I ain't made that way," answered Ned, starting to run down stairs.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STARVATION CHAMBER.

"STOP, you young hound! Hold up, or I'll skin you!" yelled Joe, as he rushed from the room, and ran after the flying boy.

"Oh, yes! I'll come right back. Jist you wait there till you see me. Tell old Grip I'm a-comin'."

He was running at full speed down the stairs as he shouted back these words. But he was not going to escape his enemies so easily. Grip sprang to the head of the stairs, and called out at the top of his voice:

"Hillo! down there. Stop that boy! Don't let him escape!"

There was the sound of footsteps below. As Ned reached the foot of the lower flight, he found himself confronted by the burly form of the bartender, who had heard the alarm and rushed from his den.

"What's up, boy? You can't go this way."
"Catch him! Bring him back!" came from above.

"You hear that, boy? You'd best cave."

"Much I'll cave," retorted Ned, turning the corner of the stairs, and taking his old course toward the yard.

But in running through the kitchen he found a snag in his way. His enemy, the woman, stood there, and as he ran past she grasped him firmly by the coat-collar.

"Been hookin' something again, have you?"

Ned strove vigorously to tear himself loose, but in an instant more the bartender had him by the arm, while Joe came plunging into the room and seized his other arm.

"Come back," he cried. "We're not done with you yet."

"I'm done with you," screamed Ned, struggling to escape. "This thing's played out. I ain't nobody's football."

He struggled, fought, scratched, bit with all the savagery of a young hyena, giving the three of them all they could do to hold him. They dragged him back step by step, he still resisting.

Then he began to yell for help at the top of his voice.

"Murder! Help! Murder! Police! Help!" he screamed, loud enough to be heard a block away.

"Stop him, or we'll have the whole street on us!" cried Grip, who had now reached the spot. "Gag him! Knock him senseless! Do something to stop his tongue!"

The bartender obeyed. His burly fist fell on the boy's head with a blow that leveled him to the floor. At the same moment the woman whipped off her apron and tied it around his mouth as an effectual gag.

"Now, up the stairs with him."

Joe and the bartender picked up the prostrate boy and started for the stairs. It was no easy job. Ned could yell no more, but he kicked and fought as fiercely as before, and Grip and the woman had to come to their help before they could make any headway.

At length, one grasping each foot and one each arm, he was carried up-stairs like a sack of wheat, borne to a room on the fourth floor, and flung down like a log.

"You'll stay there till you tell me what you've done with that paper, if it's a month," hissed Grip. "And you'll stay hungry. I'll starve you into submission, you sewer rat. We'll see who'll tire out first."

"It won't be me, you can bet your level dollar on that," retorted Ned, as he tore the gag from his mouth.

No answer was given. The door was slammed to and locked and he left alone to his meditations. He could hear his tormentors walking away, probably to make a fuller examination of his discarded clothes.

"If I ain't sold you, old Grip, there's no use talkin'," he said, to himself, triumphantly. "It never come inter their noddles to go through this new rig. I tell you, that cucumber dodge was cute. And wasn't it lucky they didn't git onto my hat yisterday!"

He laughed to himself as he lay prostrate, slowly recovering from the effects of his violent struggle. It was fifteen minutes before he rose to his feet, and even then he staggered with exhaustion. He had about used up his nerve force in the fight.

He looked around the room. It was bare of furniture except one or two broken chairs. There was a single window, which he soon found to look down on an alley between two houses. There was no escape this way. The surface level was more than thirty feet below him. Had it looked upon the street he might have called for help, but no one was likely to enter that alley, and the house opposite presented only a blank wall, unbroken by a single window.

They had him here. He left the window and went to the door. The lock was a strong one, and the door of inch-thick solid stuff.

"I reckon I'm in for it," he said to himself. "But I ain't goin' to giv up while ther's a chance open. If old Grip tries to starve me I'll eat that paper, and then see if he gets it. He's goin' to tire me out, he says. We'll see who's got the most grit, him or me."

This thought, however, brought a measure of precaution to his mind. He took the precious prize from his pocket and thrust it into a crack beneath the surbse.

"They mought tackle onto that cucumber dodge," he considered, "and come and go through my new rig. Old Grip's no slouch, narytime; but I reckon I'm rayther wide-awake, too."

He had not yet completed his examination of the room. There was a closet to be looked into. This he opened, but found nothing but a handful of old newspapers at the bottom, and on the upper shelf some blank writing-paper and a few loose envelopes. The stump of a well-worn lead-pencil, an inch in length, lay there, too.

"Dunno as all that's much good to me," he muttered. "There's nobody to write letters to jist now."

Night in due time came on. The events of that day had been many and exciting, and the youthful prisoner was pretty well worn out. With the first approach of darkness he flung himself at full length on the hard floor, and within five minutes was as fast asleep as if he lay on a couch of rose-leaves. Rough as it was, he had slept the night before in still worse quarters.

When he woke again the room was flooded with light. He had been roused by the rough application of a foot and the sound of a loud voice:

"Come, stir your stumps. Are you ready to hand over that paper?"

It was the voice of Joe. Ned struggled to his feet, and looked up in quizzical triumph.

"You went through my duds; didn't you get it?"

"You knew very well it wasn't there, shoot you! Stand still now. I'm going to see if you managed in any way to transfer it to these clothes. You're smart enough, hang you!"

Ned stood quietly, with a quizzical smile on his face, while Joe thoroughly searched him. Nothing was found. Joe looked at him with a disappointed aspect.

"See here, boy, you've hid that somewhere," he said. "You'd better give it up. You don't know Mr. Grip, or you wouldn't fight him. He says he'll starve you, and he'll do it. You'll not get a mouthful to eat nor a drop to drink, if it takes a month. You'd better take what he offered and hand over the paper. It's no use to you, anyhow."

"It is to him, though, and I reckon I'll stand a little starvin', just to spite him. How much is he givin' you fur this job?"

"Confound your impudence!" cried Joe savagely. "I'll break your jaw if you try any slack on me! Will you take the fifty or not?"

"The price of papers has riz," said Ned coolly. "That dokymment's worth a cool five hundred now. I won't sell it to old Grip for a cent less."

"Then stay here and starve," cried Joe angrily, as he jerked the door to with a bang, and securely locked it.

That day was the longest Ned Norman ever passed. Not a soul came near him. By night he was desperately hungry, and was suffering horribly from thirst. At intervals during the day he hammered madly on the door, but no one came to his relief.

During the night his sleep was broken by terrible dreams. He awoke the succeeding morning the prey of the fiercest anguish. He could have stood the hunger, but the thirst was devouring him. Should he give up? Another day like this would kill him. He set his teeth like the jaws of a steel-trap.

"I'll beat old Grip if I die for it! He kin starve me, I reckon, but he can't tire me out."

At this moment the key was turned and the door opened. The face of Joe looked in. That of Grip was visible in the hall behind it.

"Are you ready to take the fifty dollars and give up the paper?"

"No! You can tell that white-faced devil that's hidin' behind you that that paper's worth five hundred dollars, and he can't have it for a cent less, if I die for it. If he don't take that now, it'll be a thousand to-morrow."

A fierce oath came from Joe's lips. For the moment he seemed about to make an assault on the indomitable boy, but at a signal from Mr. Grip, he closed and locked the door. Ned could hear their footsteps as they walked away. In an extremity of anguish, and hardly knowing what he did, he flung himself against the door, and kicked and beat it with all his strength. Joe returned.

"Well," he called through the door, "are you ready to give up?"

"I want some water! Bring me some water!"

"Not a drop till you hand over the paper."

"I won't do it," cried the unyielding boy.

"I won't never give it till old Grip forks over."

Joe walked away again. Ned flung himself on the floor and writhed in the agony of starvation. But terrible as was his bodily anguish his mind remained firm. His indignation against his enemy was so great that he felt ready to die rather than yield.

At this moment a sound came to his ears that brought him instantly into an attitude of listening attention.

It came again—a boy's whistle. It reached him through the open window. Like an arrow from the bow Ned sprang to his feet, and hastened to the window. There, in the alley below, was something that brought his heart to his mouth. He saw the ragged form of a diminutive boothblack, who was fixing up his box, and whistling as independently as if he owned New York.

"Hello!" cried Ned, with a cry of hope and joy.

"Hello yourself!" answered the boy, looking around him in surprise.

"Squint your eye up this way."

"Oh! it's there you is?" answered the youngster, who had now caught sight of Ned's head, protruded from the window. "Whatcher want?"

"I dunno. Want to git out o' this, I reckon."

"Well, why don't you git out? I ain't a hinderin'."

"I can't. I'm a prisoner. I'm locked up here, and they're starvin' me."

"My eye! what a lark!"

The shoeblack was now full of interest.

"I ain't eat or drank a mouthful fur two days."

"That's p'izen bad! It ain't a sell? Ye'r not givin' me or nothin'?"

"I'll tell you all about it; it's a paper they want to get from me," answered the pent-up negotiator in a low, mysterious tone, "and I won't give it up, no, not for a cent less than a thousand dollars."

If he had desired to rouse the utmost interest of the boy, he couldn't have taken a better course. Here was a romance in real life that was worth a dozen novels.

"Wait!" cried the urchin. "I'll fetch you out. I'll bring all the boys, and we'll go through the old shanty like rank p'izen."

"No," said Ned, to whom a new thought had just then come, "I can tell you a better way. You know New York?"

"Well, I'd smile! Whatcher take me fur?"

"Then I want you to deliver a letter for me. It'll be worth a dollar to you."

"I'm yer boss. Sail in."

"Wait a few minutes till I write it."

Leaving the window Ned hurried to the closet, took possession of the pencil and a sheet of paper, and hastily wrote a few lines. He then inclosed the sheet in one of the envelopes, and taking the hidden paper from the place where he had concealed it, he unfolded it and placed it with the written sheet. He next sealed and directed the envelope.

"Can you find Burton & Jones's store, No. — William street?"

"You bet. I ain't no cross-cut saw, but I reckon I'm sharp 'nough fur sich a job as that. Ain't yer got nothin' harder?"

"Take this letter there; ask for Mr. Burton; don't give it to nobody else. Tell him where I am, and ask him to come and take me out. You won't forget this place?"

"Do you see anything green in my eye? A high old shebang it is, too. Jist the raringest old shebang in York. Drop that thar dokymment. I'll fetch him."

Ned let fall the letter. Without waiting for

further directions the urchin seized it, snatched his box, looked up at Ned with a knowing wink, and darted out of the alley.

The prisoner left the window with a face full of hope. He fancied he had won in the shake-up with Grip & Gorley.

CHAPTER VII.

"I'VE SENT FOR HIM, AND HERE HE IS."

"I DON'T want any blacking to-day."

The speaker was a portly, benevolent-looking personage, who sat in a revolving-chair at an office desk.

"I dunno as I axed you fur no shine," replied the youthful individual addressed.

"Then you'd better get out. What do you want here?"

"Want a dollar."

"A dollar? Well, that's cool! What for?"

"Fur fetchin' you this here dokyment."

He drew from his pocket and held out to the merchant a grimy envelope.

"What's all this about? Come, get out. I have no time to waste on you."

"Much I'll git. Nary a step till you read this and fork over my greenback. Then you've got to foller me, 'cause the chap as sent it's a prisoner, and I'm to fetch you, an' you an' me's to fetch him out. He's 'way up at the top of a house, and he's in quod there."

The boy had grown very earnest and mysterious. He turned his box on end and seated himself as if he was a fixture. Mr. Burton—for it was he—looked at him in surprise. Then, with a laugh, he extended his hand and said:

"Dear me, what a mystery we have here! Hand me the letter. If I find it worth a dollar you shall have it."

"There's a paper. The feller's hid it. The'r tryin' ter squeeze it outter him. He axes 'em a thousand dollars, and it's got to be forked down fore witnesses. I tell you, it's jist gay. I jist never got inter nothin' as prime's this afore."

Mr. Burton looked at him again, then opened the envelope and extracted its contents. These consisted of a greatly creased and crumpled half-sheet of letter-paper, and a folded and penciled slip.

The latter he first opened and read as follows:

"I'm a prisoner. Old Grip's got me and he's starving me, 'cause I won't fork over. I send you the paper, 'cause he won't let me fetch it, and I'm bound he sha'n't have it. Dunno what it's all 'bout, but he wants it back worse than p'izen. Don't you miss coming with the boy, for I ain't had nothin' to eat and drink for two days, and I'm pretty near pegged out; I can't go it another day, nohow."

"What does this mean? Where did you get it? Who is this Ned Norman?"

"Dunno no more nor a catfish. I'll tell you all I know 'bout it. It's a gay lark now, you bet."

The urchin proceeded to describe his adventure, Mr. Burton listening with much interest. At the end of the story he turned to the second paper:

"MESSRS. BURTON & JONES:—

"Pay to the bearer the sum of one hundred dollars, and charge the same to account of

"GRIP & GORLEY."

"Well, that's odd! What in the world can they mean? Grip & Gorley! Sending a cash order on me! Well, I'd give twice the money to find out what they've been at in the Government supply department. See here, Jones," to a gentleman who had just entered, "what do you make of this?"

Mr. Jones received the paper, but his eye fell on the other side of it. He looked at it curiously, an odd expression stealing over his face.

"Where did you get this? It's confoundedly queer. By Jove! I think here's the secret of our losing the contract. That's Gorley's hand—I'd know it anywhere. And Jenkins's, of course. I don't wonder you're puzzled. But where's the rest of the letter? and how under the sun did you get this?"

That Burton was puzzled was true enough; and he grew more puzzled at every word from his partner.

"What in the world are you talking about?" he cried, at length, snatching the paper from his hand. "There's nothing there but an order on us from Grip & Gorley for a hundred dollars—Ha! what's this? I didn't see this before."

His eyes had now fallen on the reverse side of the paper. What he saw was the half of a letter, addressed to "H. Jenkins, Esq." The signature was wanting, for the paper had been torn in half down the middle, and all that remained was a series of half lines of writing, whose sense was tantalizingly incomplete.

He read them over and over, Jones looking over his shoulder.

"Well, this is strange—and mighty suspicious. Has Jenkins been bribed to suppress our bid, and work in that of Grip & Gorley? It looks much like it, eh, Jones? But why did Grip send it to us, and with that order on it? Is it a sell?"

"What order?"

"See here."

He showed the order for the money.

"That's confoundedly queer. How did you get the paper? Who is the bearer? This boy?"

"Reckon I fotched it yere," answered the bootblack. "And I want my dollar. I ain't goin' to be dished outer that."

"Here it is; you've earned it," answered Mr. Burton, with a smile. "Wait; maybe you may make another."

He proceeded to tell Mr. Jones the whole story of how he became possessed of the paper, his partner listening with absorbing interest.

"By Jove! that makes it deeper than ever!" exclaimed Jones. "What is Grip up to? What does the whole business mean, anyhow? Has he blundered in some way, and is he trying to repair his mistake? There's a big nigger in the wood-pile here, Burton."

"There is, and no mistake. We must go for this prisoner at once. You can take us to him, boy?"

"I should smile if I couldn't. But there's two o' you. I on'y contracted fur one. You got to fork over two dollars fur that, 'cause it's double work."

The merchants smiled at this new conception of arithmetic.

"All right. Two dollars it shall be."

"That's hokey-davy! I'm yer elephant. Git ready; I'm on the war-path." He hoisted his box to his shoulders, and stood eager for the words.

In a few minutes more the strangely-assorted trio were on their way.

Meanwhile matters of interest were transpiring in the prison-house of Ned Norman. Mr. Grip and Joe were in close and earnest conference in the apartment they had formerly occupied.

"It's no particular affair of mine," said Joe.

"You pay me for my work, and you're going to pay me extra for this. But I might ask, is the game worth the candle? If it is, how came you to give that paper to the boy? Has it anything to do with that old affair?"

"It was all a stupid blunder. I wouldn't have Burton & Jones get it for five thousand dollars."

"But suppose the boy should die on our hands?" Joe's voice trembled a little.

"No, no; I don't want that."

"But he may, if this lasts much longer."

"I wish I'd given him the hundred dollars. I wanted to tire him out, and, confound him, he's going to tire me out."

"The rascal's put his price now at a thousand; and I don't believe there's a cent of fall in him. He's got more grit than a yoke of oxen."

"I hate to give in," said Grip, setting his teeth tightly.

"It won't do to have him dead on our hands. We've got to change our plans. As for the paper, this much is sure, it's not on him. He's hid it somewhere. If we can only make him say where."

"If? But how? We'd better try something more sudden than starving. The thumb trick is a good one. Tie him up by the thumbs and keep him there till he tells."

Joe shook his head.

"It won't do."

"Why won't it do? There's not a man in this city could stand it ten minutes."

"There's a boy, then. Or a young devil, which he seems to be. I'll tell you what will come of it."

"What?"

"He'll raise his price to two thousand, and stick to that like grim death. You'd best try and buy him off at the thousand, if he won't take less."

Mr. Grip leaned his head on his hand and seemed buried in deep reflection. He continued thus for several minutes, his lips working curiously. At length he sprung to his feet with an air of decision.

"Come," he said.

Joe followed. Grip led the way to the cell of their prisoner. At a motion to Joe the door was opened and they entered.

The captive sat on a chair by the window, his head resting on the sill. He looked up on their entrance, but did not rise, nor show much interest.

"Come, young man," said Mr. Grip, with a show of kindness, "this thing has gone far enough. That paper is mine, as you know. I want it back, and will give you all it calls for. Why do you act so obstinately about it?"

"'Cause you ain't acted straight."

"Come, come; let's make an end of this. I'll give you the hundred dollars."

"My figure went up to a thousand yesterday. I ain't makin' no drop to-day."

"That's all nonsense, boy. How much do you really want for that paper?"

"That paper ain't for sale," answered Ned, resolutely. "You wouldn't buy at my figure. It's gone up out o' sight to-day. I reckon that there paper ain't in the market."

"What have I done to you that you should act in such a senseless fashion?"

"'Bout all you knowed how," rejoined Ned. "You've been squeezin' me rough. But you started to bark up the wrong tree, and I calculate you're goin' to find that out."

"See here, now; tell me where you have put the paper, and I will count you down five hundred dollars on this table."

"And grab it up ag'in after I've told."

"No, no; I will deal honest with you. But I trust to you to tell the truth."

"Nobody never caught me in a lie yet," answered Ned, indignantly. "But I'm jist burnin' up alive. You'll not git another word out o' me till you fetch me some water."

Joe went out at a sign from Mr. Grip, and returned in a minute or two with a tumbler of water. This Ned seized with the avidity of overpowering thirst and swallowed its contents at a single gulp.

"That's good!" he said, with infinite satisfaction.

"Well, are you ready to answer?"

"I'll tell you this much," answered Ned. "I ain't hid it nowhere. But I've put it in good hands. You plank down the money, and I'll send for the man that's got it, and tell him that you've bought it and that I ain't got no more claim on it."

"Very well. Here's the money. But you are not to touch it till the man with the paper makes his appearance."

"It'll be mine then?"

"Yes."

"Then it's a bargain."

Mr. Grip drew a wallet from his pocket and began to count out bank-notes. Ned, who still sat by the window, looked at him languidly. There was a queer expression on his face. The notes were half counted when a whistle was heard outside. Ned thrust his head out of the window and made a signal with his hand.

"What's that?" cried Joe, who had noticed the movement.

He sprang to the window and looked suspiciously out. No one was visible. The alley was deserted.

"It's what I call a sell," said Ned, coolly.

Mr. Grip continued to count out notes.

"There are five hundred," he announced.

"Now keep your word, and send for the holder of the paper."

"No use in that. He's sent for already."

"What?"

"He'll be here with the paper inside of a minute. That's business, I reckon."

"What folly is this?"

"Don't you hear them steps?"

Footsteps indeed could be heard on the stairs. Grip and Joe looked at one another in surprise. The next moment the bootblack urchin leaped into the room.

"This youngster? Is he the one that has the paper?"

"No; but this is the one."

A manly figure had followed the guide into the room, at sight of whom Grip fell back with a cry of astonishment that was almost terror.

A second person followed. They were the merchants, Burton & Jones. Ned sprang forward and covered the money on the table with both hands.

"I reckon I've earned this," he cried. "That man's got the paper," pointing to Mr. Burton. "I've sent for him, and here he is."

CHAPTER VIII.

A FIGHT FOR A TREASURE.

"THERE'S your man. He's got the paper. That fills out my contract. And I calculate this is my provender," cried Ned, busily thrusting the bank-notes into his pockets as he spoke.

"Hand that over, you young thief!" yelled Grip, partly recovering. "I didn't—"

"Didn't intend to let me have it. I knowed that. But I earned it, 'cordin' to contract, and I've got it."

He grabbed the last of the notes, slipped under Grip's grasping fingers, and sprung for the door.

"You'd best slide like a pound o' butter off a hot plate," he cried, to the new-comers. "This is a ugly hole, an' there's ugly customers around."

He darted for the stairs, followed closely by the bootblack, and at a little distance by the infuriated Grip. The latter, as on a previous occasion, began to shout at the top of his voice:

"Stop him! Don't let him escape!"

The sound of a slamming door below showed that the alarm had been taken.

The next moment a new thought came into the villain's mind. He had no doubt that Burton held the paper. The boy had in some way conveyed it to him. He was the one to go for, not the boy. He turned sharply on his heel, while he cried to Joe:

"Lock the door! Don't let them out! They shall not go till they return that paper!"

He was too late. It is idle to fasten the cage after the bird is out. The two merchants had taken the alarm given by Ned, and rushed from the room. Grip turned to find them close beside him, and Joe following them.

He placed himself across their path, with the intention of stopping them, but Burton, the largest man of the two, grappled with him, flung him vigorously aside, and rushed for the stairs. Jones followed, giving a back-handed blow to Grip as he passed that sent him reeling.

The villain, however, was but an instant in recovering. He rushed after them, with Joe close on his heels, yelling as before to his confederates below:

"Stop them! Don't let them past! A hundred dollars to the man that stops them!"

Down the stairs went fugitives and pursuers, in headlong flight. From the bar-room below several hard-faced customers emerged. It was a dangerous locality, and Messrs. Burton & Jones were likely to find it no easy matter to escape from the hornets' nest which they had entered.

Meanwhile the two boys had continued their flight. Not to the lower floor, however. Ned had had his eye-teeth cut. He remembered his former experience, heard the warning cries of his enemy, and determined not to fall into the same trap again.

"This way," he cried to his companion. "What's your name?"

"Dick."

"This way, Dick. Down-stairs ain't safe for chaps like us."

He darted into a rear room on the second floor, the one from which he had formerly seen the woman looking. He had not forgotten that the window of this room opened upon a slanting roof over the kitchen door.

It took him but a minute to reach the window, throw up the sash and spring out upon the roof. Down it he ran to the lower edge, let himself down by his hands and dropped to the yard below. He had not far to fall.

Dick, with the agility of a young monkey, followed him. In a moment they stood side by side in the yard.

Contrary to his former experience the gate stood ajar. He looked into the kitchen; it was empty.

"Them's lively papers!" cried Dick, enthusiastically. "Let's git."

The agile youngster had clung to his box, which still hung over his shoulder.

"Wait," answered Ned. "There's no hurry. I s'pose you're in for fun?"

"Ain't I? Whatcher take me fur?"

"Open your ears, then; there's some slap-up old fun a-comin'."

In fact, threatening sounds, the rush of human forms, furious shouts, threats, answering cries, could be heard from within the house. Evidently things were becoming critical. The boys ventured into the kitchen, attracted by these signs of warfare, and eager to discover what was going on.

Ned looked curiously through the inner door. There stood his old enemy, the woman, and opposite her the bartender, with a couple of hard-faced customers behind him. The sound of steps could be heard on the stairs, as loud almost as if a dozen oxen had been coming down at a plunge. The voice of Grip sounded above all:

"Stop them! Don't let them past! A hundred dollars for their bodies!"

An instant more and affairs were lively enough to suit even Dick. A dozen men seemed mingled

in mortal combat, and blows were being given and taken with indiscriminate fury.

The two fugitives had sprung from the stairs, and were seeking with all their strength to force their way through the group of their foes.

The first onset leveled the two bloated rummies to the floor, but the burly bartender, and the little less burly woman, still blocked the way, and in the next instant Grip and Joe sprung down and joined the fray.

Burton and Jones were by no means weaklings. They were both strong men and fought hard, while they called lustily for help. But, the odds were against them, and in that street help was the more likely to be on the other side.

Hard blows were given and returned, the combatants were down, up, struggling as if for dear life, tearing and rending like demons in a fray.

The two boys so far had been mere spectators, though Dick was dancing with eagerness to take part, and swinging his box threateningly. Ned kept more cool, watching his chances, and in doubt whether he had not better go for the police.

His chance soon came. His old enemy, the woman, had taken advantage of Mr. Burton's back being turned to her, raised a heavy poker which she had brought from the kitchen, and was about to bring it down with a stunning blow on his head. At that instant Ned sprung into the fray, tripped up her heels from behind, and gave her a thrust that sent her like a log to the floor, the crack of her head on the boards sounding above the noise of the fight.

This diversion was momentarily in favor of the defendants; but, the odds were too great; a vigorous blow sent Jones reeling to the floor; another hurled Ned upon the woman, who was striving to get up, and brought her again to the floor, while he came down upon her as a soft cushion to break his fall.

While this was going on Mr. Burton was seized by the strong arms of Joe and the bartender, and held too firmly to move. Grip took instant advantage of the opportunity, sprung upon his foe, and began to search his pockets with the adroitness of a pickpocket.

Less than a minute sufficed. From Burton's vest pocket he extracted the highly-treasured document. The merchant, not foreseeing such an affair as this, had carelessly thrust it in this insecure receptacle. One hasty glance convinced Grip of the value of his capture. Holding it aloft, he waved it round his head with the triumph of a victor, and shouted in tones of glee:

"I've got it! I've got it! Let them go. Out of doors with them! We've got no further use for them."

While he continued to wave his prize in triumph, his assistants obeyed this order. Burton was rushed violently to the door by the two men who held him, and thrust out reeling upon the pavement. The other two men grasped Jones as he rose staggering to his feet, and hurled him into the street after his partner. Grip looked on with a grin of irrepressible triumph, still excitedly waving the captured treasure.

It seemed for the moment as if he had won the battle, and distanced all his opponents. But there is many a slip between the cup and the lip, as he was destined to learn. His triumph was about to be converted into defeat from an unexpected quarter.

Dick, as we have said, had stood outside the fray, dancing with excitement, and looking eagerly for a chance to join in. His chance had come. As Grip for the last time waved his prize above his head, a crushing blow came on his arm, almost enough to break it. The paper flew fluttering from his hand, and the arm fell disabled to his side.

Dick had got his work in. Swinging his wooden bootblack's box around by the strings with which he carried it, he brought it down vigorously on Grip's arm. With a leap like that of a cat he sprung for the fluttering paper, and caught it before it reached the floor.

"Hurrah for our side! Let's git!" he cried to Ned, who had just then disengaged himself from the woman and struggled to his feet.

Ned was not quite ready. He saw one last opportunity to get even with the enemy. Grip stood writhing with the pain of the blow he had received. One kick on his heels from Ned's heavy shoes knocked his feet from under him, and down he came like a log on the broad of his back, falling with such force as to half stun him.

One quick leap took Ned into the kitchen, whither Dick had already preceded him.

"Come ahead!" he shouted, "Lively! The gate's our dodge. Let out, my lad!"

"Let out's the word. Dig in and I'm arter you like a cat arter milk."

The gate, as we have said, was ajar. It was the work of a few seconds only for the agile boys to reach it, fling it open and gain the alley beyond. Down this they fled like a pair of weasels, the sounds of pursuit behind adding wings to their speed.

Pursuit began too late. The fugitives were in the street beyond before their pursuers had gained the gate. A lively run quickly put them beyond all danger of being overtaken.

"Did you git it, Dick?"

"You bet yer level dollar. My eye, didn't I fotch him prime! Never had sich a lark in my born days. Here it is."

He pulled the captured prize from his pocket and handed it to his companion.

"Bully for you, Dick. That's it, sure enough. Tell you what, boy, this thing's worth a hundred dollars, and it's yourn. Burton's got to fork over if he wants it, but I reckon he won't kick."

"I don't want mor'n half," protested Dick.

"You've got to take all. Why, Dick, I got five hundred out of old Grip. I'm richer than Vanderbilt. Got 'most 'nough to buy a steamboat."

As the boys walked onward talking they saw before them two downcast-looking men, with torn clothes and generally-disreputable appearance.

They were the merchants, Burton and Jones. The boys came up close behind them, curious to hear their conversation.

"Confounded fool that I was not to leave that paper at the office!" growled Burton.

"Grip's got the whip-band on us."

"Yes; we've no evidence without that. It called for a hundred dollars for the boy; I'd give that much money this minute to have it back in my fingers."

"That's hokey! That'll be fifty apiece," came a gleeful voice behind him. "Say, mister, you kin fork over now, fur here's the dokymment."

What was the surprise and joy of the discomfited merchants, on turning, to see behind them their late confederates, one of them waving his cap in the air, the other the captured paper.

CHAPTER IX

THE BOOTBLACKS' BANQUET.

A VERY amusing scene was being enacted in one of the fashionable New York restaurants, a scene such as never before had been beheld in that home of wealth and gastronomy.

In a richly-furnished apartment of said restaurant, around a handsomely-covered dining table, sat a group of boys, who were certainly much out of place in such a scene.

If their ragged and begrimed attire had not been sufficient, the brush-and-blackening boxes which reposed behind each chair would have indicated their profession—that of bootblack. They were indeed the guests of our two friends, Ned and Dick, who had decided on having a grand blow-out in consequence of their success, and to spend some of the cash to which they had fallen heir.

The proprietor of the restaurant had naturally objected to the proposition, as well from the character of his guests as from doubt of their financial ability. But when Ned, in a lofty manner, asked him for his bill in advance, and planked down the necessary funds, and when Dick insisted on his compliance with all the assurance of a City Hall "shiner," the proprietor gave way, looking on the affair as a stupendous joke.

And now, with Ned at the head and Dick at the foot of the table, and a dozen of sharp-eyed "blacks" ranged along its sides, everything was ready for the banquet to begin.

The waiters who stood behind, in all the splendor of black coats and white cravats, almost choked themselves in their efforts to preserve the gravity fitting the occasion, and dared not look at one another for fear of exploding into laughter.

"Now, fellers, you're here to eat; don't you forget that," began Ned. "Tain't often this here place gits such a distinguished crowd, and I want you to let 'em see that you know somethin'. Don't nobody dig in, 'cause these here flunkies is here to wait on you. They're paid for it, and they've got to earn the'r dough."

"Bully fur you!" cried Dick. "We're gin'le-men, you bet! The feller as cuts up any shindigs is goin' to be h'isted, and I'm the chap that's goin' to h'ist him. You hear me."

"Dry up, and let's pile in," exclaimed one of the larger urchins. "While you're givin' us

all that chin music the vittals is gittin' cold, and I didn't come down here to lunch on cold vittals."

The eyes of the other boys were sparkling as if they quite agreed with this sentiment, and Ned, seeing that they had been restrained long enough, gave the signal for the waiters to begin.

Dick had ordered "a high-up old feed, just like the bloods git," and the banquet began with plates of soup—very thin soup—placed before the guests.

The gamins sat looking down at their plates with bewilderment, the eyes of some of them as large as saucers, while others, thinking they were being made fun of, grew red with anger.

"What yer takin' us fur?" cried Dick. "We didn't come here ter go a-swimmin'. Not in such puddle water as that, anyhow."

"I reckon this is a sell, fellers," cried another. "Them flunkies think we don't know nothin' better'n dish-water."

"That's the soup. We always begin with soup," explained one of the waiters, while the others stuffed their napkins into their mouths to prevent the threatened explosion.

"Soup!" cried Dick, turning up his nose. "Whatcher comin' over us? I guess that's the kind o' soup as a feller kin wade a mile through 'thout findin' a bean. I've hearn tell o' that sort."

"Dry up, and dig in. Don't expose your ignorance," exclaimed Ned, with authority. "It's better than it looks."

As he set the example, the guests followed, though evidently with no great relish, some using spoons, others drinking from the edge of the plates.

"Now take them slops away and fetch us somethin' to eat," ordered Ned. "We didn't come here to drink our dinner."

"Bully for you," cried one of the boys. "Talk 'bout soup! Sich stuff as that! Fotch along somethin' solid and we'll show you what boys' teeth was made fur."

In a trice the waiters whipped away the half-emptied plates, and with little regard for the due succession of courses, placed before their unsophisticated guests fish, flesh, and fowl in mingled profusion.

"Help yerself, fellers. Dig in lively; I'm a-goin' ter," yelled one.

"No yer ain't, or you'll go a-sailin' out that there door," cried Dick. "That's what these here flunkies is paid fur, and we're not goin' ter waste our money. If yer want anything jist ax them perlately."

What to ask for, however, was beyond the boys' power to decide, the banquet before them being as strange to their eyes as an undiscovered country.

"I'll take some deviled crabs and fricasseed terrapins for mine," said Ned, "and a set-out o' lobster-salad. We've paid for the best, boys, and don't let's be put off with no every-day hash."

This cue was quickly taken, and there was an uproarious call for the dishes ordered by Ned, with such other outlandish viands as occurred to the boys' sense of humor.

"Fotch me some biled cobble-stones, and pickled blue-birds' wings," cried one.

"I'll take pigs' toe-nails and oysters," yelled another.

The waiters looked at each other as a succession of such orders rolled round the table. A wink from the leading waiter cut the knot of the difficulty. Taking a cut from the first dish that presented itself he offered it to Ned.

"Here's your fricasseed terrapin, sir. What else did you order, sir?"

The other waiters took the cue, and served the remaining boys in the same haphazard fashion, very well satisfied that none of them would know what they were eating.

"Now, fellers, dig's the word," cried Dick. "Don't make hogs o' yerselves, but jist put yerselves outside this grub as lively as you kin do it perlite."

This was an order the hungry young Arabs were quite ready to obey, and for the next ten minutes the rattle of knife and fork and the clatter of crockery filled the room with music, while the waiters were kept busy satisfying the wants of their uncereceremonious guests.

Some of the latter were inclined to discard the civilized incumbrances of knife, fork, and spoon, and go back to the primitive implements of fingers and teeth; but these Dick brought up with a round turn, giving them plainly to understand that he would permit no lapses into barbarism.

"See here, fellers: next thing we'll have these here servants"—there was an expression of

haughty superiority in Dick's use of this word—"these here servants sayin' as we're gutter-snipes, as ain't had no fotchin' up. Now, fur the honor o' the 'shine-em-ups,' don't you go fur to make hogs o' yerselves. An' I'll punch the snout o' the fu'st feller as does, that's more."

"Good for you, Dick," cried Ned. "Keep your end o' the table straight, and I'll keep mine."

Abundant as had been the provision made, the boys' appetites had not been accurately gauged, and the dishes needed to be filled up again before they had their fill of the solids and were ready for the dessert.

What they had been eating the most of them knew no more than the man in the moon, but appetite covered all deficiencies in knowledge, and no more thoroughly enjoyed feast had ever been served in that apartment.

"Whatcher got next?" queried Dick, on the removal of the plates.

"Plum-puddin', cabinet-puddin', suet-puddin', apple-dumplin'," began one of the waiters, in a sing-song tone, "mince-pie, apple-pie, cherry-pie, egg-custard, cocoanut-custard, lemon—"

"Dry up," cried Ned, authoritatively. "Fetch them along. Reckon that's enough. We don't want to eat a whole 'pothecary's shop, or a camp-meetin' set-out."

"Fotch me 'bout three kinds o' puddin' and four kinds o' pie," cried Dick. "I ain't as hungry as I was, and a feller's got ter haul short somewhere. Don't want ter be a hog."

The pies and puddings looked, after five minutes' exercise, as if a famine had struck the table. Much as the gamins had devoured, their appetite for pastry seemed untouched, and the eyes of the waiters opened wide to see the havoc that was made.

Even the giver of the feast thought it best to call a halt at last.

"There's more a-comin', boys; and if you keep on fillin' up in that style you won't have room for a fly's wing."

"More a-comin'?" cried one of the gamins, letting fall a huge cut of pie.

"Yes; ice-cream and cakes, and extras."

"Ice-cream!" yelled the gamin in ecstasy. "Yer ain't a-sayin' it fur a dodge? 'Tain't no sell now, is it?"

"Nary sell," exclaimed Dick. "Jist you servants pile out with this truck, and pile in with the next course. And lively, too, 'cause we've paid in advance."

In a trice the table was emptied and the "servants" had covered it again with pyramids of cream and dishes of cake, to the utter delight of the youngsters, whose indulgence in this luxury hitherto had been confined to a five-cent feast from a street-vender.

"Why didn't yer tell us 'bout this sooner, 'fore we laid in stock?"

"Ice-cream don't take up no room," explained Ned.

One would have thought it took up an immense amount of room, by the staring eyes and distorted faces of some of the boys, who had begun to indulge too profusely in the frozen viand.

"It don't choke nobody 'cept hogs," said Dick, scornfully, "and hogs oughter be choked."

Taking warning from these few victims to greediness, the remaining boys ate their cream more moderately. But Ned's suggestion that ice-cream took up no room seemed verified by the way in which the pyramids lowered and disappeared.

But the powers of the young gourmands were at length exhausted, and when the active waiters removed the emptied dishes and replaced them with heaped-up baskets of fruit and nuts, they could only open their eyes in astonishment and regret and look reproachfully at the givers of the feast.

"Oranges! pine-apples! bananers!" cried one.

"Nuts!" ejaculated another.

"And nobody never told us," said a third.

"Oh, laws! is all them got ter be eat?"

"The'r paid fer," explained Dick. "Yer ain't a-goin' ter let the landlord make nothin' off yer, hey?"

This suggestion roused some of the more ambitious of the boys, and a few feeble attempts to devour the fruit were made; but it was of no use; the limit of their capacity had been reached.

The waiters looked on with secret smiles. They had been astonished at the feats of the gamins, and this defeat was a triumph to them. Ned observed this, and at once determined that they should not have the laugh on the bootblacks.

"It's paid fur, fellers, and it's yourn," he shouted. "If you ain't got no room in your in-

sides, you have in your pockets. Go in, boys; these flunkies are laughin' at you."

"Them servants a-laughin' at us! I'm 'stonished!" cried Dick. "Let's make 'em laugh t'other side er the mouth."

He set the example by thrusting both hands into the fruit and rapidly filling his pockets. The other boys lost no time in following his example, and almost before one could count ten the fruits and nuts had disappeared from the vision of the astonished waiters and the pockets of the gamins were enormously distended.

"Where does the laugh come in now?" demanded Ned, turning with a wink to the waiters. "I s'pose we're 'bout through. Ain't nothin' more comin', hey?"

"Wine and cigars," suggested one of the waiters, with difficulty preserving his gravity.

"Nary wine and cigars," said Ned, decidedly.

"There's where the line's got to be drawn. But I reckon we could go some lemonade."

This proposal was received with applause, and the waiters, who had been directed to supply all that had been called for, were not long in filling this new order; nor were the boys long in emptying the flowing bowls of the healthful beverage.

"Now," cried Dick, "the fun's over; biz is on. Shoulder boxes; ready; march!" and marshaled in military lines, the gamins followed their leaders, down the stairs and through the main saloon, where the guests, who had heard of what was going on, anxiously awaited their advent.

The proprietor walked up, as the head of the line reached the door.

"Well, young gentlemen, how do you feel after your feast?" he asked.

"Feel?" cried Dick, "we feel full; full inside and outside, and you kin bet yer level head that's a new feel fur most of us chaps. Steady; forward; march!" and the gamins proudly filed out of the saloon, amid a chorus of laughter from the guests.

CHAPTER X.

NED MAKES A NEW CONTRACT.

Two days afterward Ned appeared at the store of Burton & Jones. He had been seeing New York under the guidance of Dick, and had managed to obtain some idea of the mysteries of the metropolis in that time. The report of the feast, toward which he had not permitted Dick to contribute a cent, had made Ned the hero of the gamins, while the story of the splendors and wonders of that banquet, as told by the participants, proved a source of interest that was not soon likely to die out.

The popularity of the two new-made friends was not diminished by the freedom with which they spent money on the inhabitants of Gaminville during these days. It might have been thought by some a dangerous society in which to make a free exhibition of funds, but certainly nothing passed out of their pockets except thought their own good will.

"Well, young man, I have heard of you," said Mr. Burton to Ned on his appearance. "In fact, you're the talk of the town; the papers have been giving the full details of the bootblacks' banquet."

"You don't say so?" cried Ned, delightedly. "Can't you cut it out and let me have it? I want to show it to Dick and the boys."

"Very well; but you look the worse for wear. What have you been doing?"

"Been seein' New York," answered Ned.

"I should judgeso. Had your pocket picked?"

"Nary time. Spent some; got the balance here," slapping his pocket. "No feller ain't goin' through me easy."

"If you are going to see any more of New York you had best leave your money in safe hands," suggested Mr. Burton. "That's my advice."

"I'm done seein' New York," answered Ned, decidedly. "After sich a slap-up time as I had with old Grip I had to let down the bars a little. But I got to make a livin', Mr. Burton, and that ain't the way to make it. I ain't no fool, and I ain't afeard o' work, and I reckon him that hires me won't waste his wages."

"I should think not," answered the merchant, looking with some admiration into the intelligent and energetic face of the boy. "I fancy that when you take hold you won't let go easy."

"Jist ask old Grip how I done when he set me to pile bricks," answered Ned, proudly. "He was goin' to tire me out, he said; I calculate it's him as got tired. Where's he now, Mr. Burton? Had any more fun with him since that high old time over yonder?" He pointed with his thumb in the direction of the recent fracas.

"He is done with me, I fancy. I hear that he has gone back to Philadelphia. But I am

not done with him. Grip & Gorley have played me an ugly trick, my lad, which I had suspected for some time, but had no evidence of until I received that torn letter. I don't regret what that cost me."

"Then you're a-goin' for him?" demanded Ned, eagerly. "You're a-goin' for him flat-footed? He served me mighty shabby, and I hope you'll pinch him lively."

"I will if I can, you may be sure. I am thousands of dollars out of pocket through his operations, and have brought suit against him for fraud and bribery of a Government agent."

"Goin' to make him squeal?" asked Ned, eagerly.

"That I can't say," rejoined the merchant, in a tone of doubt. "Though I gave a hundred dollars for this piece of paper, it may prove of very little use. Unless I can hunt up some other evidence, I fear I will not be able to prove my case. I would give a thousand for the other half of this letter."

"You would?" cried Ned, his eyes opening widely.

"Willingly," Mr. Burton looked up at the boy. "Do you think it possible—"

"To git t'other half? I'm 'feard there won't be no more chance than to catch a 'possum asleep. And old Grip's a 'possum of the worst sort. But a thousand dollars is worth tryin' for."

"I should fancy so. There are possibilities, Ned. They made a blunder about this half. Who knows but they may have blundered about the other? I have no hopes, but it is too important to let go untried."

"That's my notion," said Ned, in eager enthusiasm. "You mean it solid 'bout that thousand?"

"I do. Bring me that paper, and I am on honor to pay you a thousand dollars."

"I'm a-goin' for it, you bet," cried Ned, joyfully. "I moughtn't get it, and then ag'in I mought. See here, Mr. Burton, can't you give me a piece o' paper jist the size o' that? 'Special-ly the tore edge? I want to know t'other half when I see it."

"A good suggestion," rejoined the merchant. "I see you know what you're about, my lad."

Taking a whole sheet, he laid the torn sheet upon it, marked out its outlines with pencil, and finally cut it along the pencil marks, taking great pains to get the shape of the torn edge very closely.

"There," he said, "that's your guide. Now what do you intend to do? How about the money you have left out of your five hundred and fifty dollars? Is it safe to carry it about in your pocket?"

"I've got 'most four hundred left," answered Ned. "That blow-out made a big hole in it. I was goin' to ax you to take care of it, but I've kinder changed my mind. If I'm goin' for that paper, money mought come in handy. Maybe I'll have to pay somebody lively for a chance to 'vestigate."

"Very true. Well thought of." "I don't reckon as nobody'll go through me. I've had my eye-teeth cut."

"And what are your plans—if you have any?" asked Mr. Burton.

"Hav'n't had no time to make none yit. It's jist 'bout this way. Old Grip took that sheet o' paper out of the waste-basket in his office, tore it in half, and flung t'other half back. I see'd him do that. Now maybe it's there yit."

"No, no; I hardly expect that."

"Well, then, what does folks do with waste-paper in stores?"

"It may be burnt. I fear the contents of that basket have been. It might be heaped away somewhere, ready to sell to the old paper-dealers. It will probably end by going to the paper-mills. I fear you have but a poor chance for your thousand, Ned."

"Who sells it to the old paper-man?"

"Probably the store porter. He would most likely have charge of such matters."

"All right. That kinder clears the sky, anyhow. I'm beginnin' to find out which side of my bread's buttered."

"What are your plans?" asked Mr. Burton, curiously.

"To go back to Philadelphia fu'st of all, and spy 'round. It's 'bout a week now since I got that paper, and every day counts. What I kin come at to-day mought be gone to-morrow."

"Very true. You have the right idea."

"And I want to take Dick back with me."

"What for?" "Cause he's as sharp as a steel-trap. Old Grip knows me too well. If he sees me 'bout the store he mought smell a big rat. And maybe he mought snatch me and lock me up for steal-

in'. Ther's nobody there knows Dick, and I reckon he's sharp enough to 'bey orders."

"Very good," cried Mr. Burton. "I see my business is safe in your hands, my boy. And, by Jove! I want you after this affair is over! You shall have a good place in my store, and be put on the track of making your fortune. You are the kind of metal I like."

"That's the ticket!" cried Ned, delightedly. "That's what I've been lookin' out for this year past. I'll earn my wages, anyhow. I won't loaf on nobody. There's one thing more, Mr. Burton. Who's goin' to pay the expenses of this business? S'pose we don't hit it? Me and Dick ain't got much money to spare."

"That's business. I like you all the better for that. I will pay all expenses."

"Then it's a bargain. I'll go and hunt up Dick straight away. He ain't got no daddy nor mammy, and I reckon there won't be no trouble with him."

After some further conversation and arrangement of details, Ned went in search of his companion. He found him at his headquarters at City Hall Park, as busily engaged in polishing the "understandings" of a countrified individual as if he had not lately become a capitalist.

Ned waited quietly till he had finished his "contract," and then slyly beckoned him away. He had matter of too much moment for the ears of street urchins.

"Where can we go for a solid chat where nobody'll hear us? I've struck 'ile since I seen you, Dick, and you're in it."

"Yer ain't sayin' ther's some more fun?" cried Dick, eagerly. "You bet I'm yer hoss, slap from the shoulder. Come ahead. I know where nobody'll bother us."

He led the way, Ned following.

What was the surprise of the latter to find, on reaching their destination, that they were in the identical alley in which the two boys had first struck up an acquaintance.

Dick looked at his companion quizzically. "Reckernize the place?" he asked.

"I should imagine so."

"Ther' won't nobody bother us here, 'cept ther's somebody else in quod up yander," pointing to the window whence Ned had first discovered him. "If ther' is we'll yank him out, jist as we yanked you out. Yere's my box to set on; I'll squat on the bricks. Now peg in; I'm a-listenin'."

Ned proceeded to detail the bargain he had made, and the plan he had laid out, Dick listening with the utmost interest. He was sharp enough to take in the details of the scheme without repetition.

"It's jist jolly!" he shouted. "Will I go in for't? Well, you bet high. Kin I do it? Well, I guess I kin try. Jist you keep me posted every step, for I'm in for makin' old Grip howl. And I'd jist as lieve as not peg out fur Philadelphia, 'cause York is gittin' played out. Folks, nowadays, is mean enough to ax fur a five-cent shine. The biz ain't like it used to was. Ther's too many Dagos gittin' in it."

"All right, Dick. If this affair comes out plum up, you can drop your box. You can't be polishin' shoe-leather all your life. You're gettin' too big for that."

"I've been proud and sassy ever since that blow-out," rejoined Dick. "Orderin' around them there servants kinder put me 'bove my bizness. I'm 'feard it's jist 'bout spilt me for a shiner."

"Tell you what, Dick, I've got an idea," cried Ned, eagerly. "Come with me. I like you, and I'm goin' to hitch hosses with you."

He sprung up and led the way, Dick following. His course this time led to the store of Burton & Jones, through which he walked with the step of an owner back to the office. Dick followed with his head as high as if he had the deeds of all New York in his pocket.

The two partners were in the office, and looked up in some surprise at their visitors.

"Here's Dick," said Ned, as an introduction.

"How d'ye do, Dick?" greeted Mr. Burton.

"We ain't started over yet."

"I see that," came the dry answer.

"Goin' fore night though. I wanted to say somethin' 'bout Dick first."

"Very well. Say on."

"You said you'd take me in the store after we'd got this thing through. If it don't make no difference to you I'd sooner you'd take Dick. He's got as much go in him as me. I've got more education than him, and can git a job somewhere else."

"See here! whatcher puttin' through yer?" broke in Dick, indignantly. "Much you'll do

that! S'pose I'd come yere if you'd told me all that taffy afore? I ain't made that way."

"Nonsense, Dick. I'll have money enough to start business on my own hook."

"Dry up now, won't you? I hope you don't think, misters, as I'm on this, 'cause I ain't. He's jist sprung it on me. If he is a fool, I ain't a hog, and that settles it."

The merchants looked at each other curiously while this conversation was going on. At its conclusion they burst into a laugh.

"Good for you, Dick!" cried Mr. Jones.

"And good for you, Ned," cried Mr. Burton. "I wonder, Jones, if we couldn't find two jobs? It would be a shame to part these Siam-ese twins."

"We'll find them or make them," said Jones.

"You don't mean it?" cried Ned, joyfully.

"Yer ain't foolin'?" exclaimed Dick.

"We mean every word."

"Bully for you! You bet Ned and me won't be no slouches. Come ahead now; let's peg out for Philadelfy, and put this job through."

"Much obliged, Mr. Burton and Mr. Jones," said Ned, gratefully. "We're off now. Good-by."

That night the two boys slept in the good City of Brotherly Love.

CHAPTER XI.

DICK IN BUSINESS.

"THE case is just this," said Mr. Burton.

He was sitting in the office of a United States Commissioner, in the Federal Court buildings at Philadelphia.

"I, representing the firm of Burton & Jones, of New York, put in a bid last winter in response to an advertisement for a large supply of linens and other goods, to be delivered at the United States Arsenal at Philadelphia. There were several other bids entered, but our only competitor of any importance was the firm of Grip & Gorley, of this city."

"I remember the case. But I do not recollect the name of your firm among the bidders."

"Exactly. That is the point in question. Our bid was sent in late. An oversight made it later than it should have been. However, it was mailed in New York on the second day before the bid closed. The date of closure was the 17th October. I mailed the letter myself on the morning of the 15th."

"Time enough, I should say. What followed?"

"Our bid was not acknowledged, and the contract was given to Grip & Gorley, at a higher figure."

"I see. And your letter?"

"Came too late, they say. We made strict inquiry, of course, but Jenkins, of the Arsenal, declared that it did not reach him till the 18th, too late for admission. It had on it the letter-carrier's mark, showing that it had been left by mistake at a small down-town drinking-place called 'The Arsenal.' This, of course, delayed its proper delivery."

"Well, what follows?"

"I had some suspicions at the time, but could discover nothing. Inquiry was made at 'The Arsenal,' but no one remembered the affair. Then the letter-carrier who had delivered the letter was looked up. He said that Jenkins was right. The letter had been delivered to him by mistake at the drinking-saloon, 'Arsenal,' and been returned to him late the next day. The pencil-mark of wrong delivery had been made by him, and was in his own handwriting."

"That looks straight enough. I can see no loose threads there. Is not the fault your own? Or rather is not accident to blame?"

"I thought so at first, and gave it over to the chapter of awkward accidents. But that was not the end of the matter. Something happened that opened my eyes."

"Another loose thread, eh?"

"Exactly. Business called me a month ago to Grip & Gorley's store. Whom should I see there, in a somewhat confidential position, but Joe Starling, the letter-carrier in question. On inquiry at the Post-Office I learned that he had been discharged for some shady operation six months before. He had, immediately afterwards, been given a position at Grip & Gorley's."

"A sort of hush-money opening, eh?"

"I thought so. I knew nothing more, however, until a few days ago, when this fell into my hands."

He withdrew from his pocket the torn letter, opened and smoothed it out, and handed it to the commissioner. The latter looked at it with a puzzled expression.

"I can make nothing of this," he said. "It is addressed to 'H. Jenkins,' to be sure. But a

half-letter, with the signature part torn off, has not much significance."

"The handwriting I cannot be mistaken in," cried Mr. Burton eagerly. "It was written by Gorley, of Grip & Gorley. Here are others of his letters, which you may compare."

The commissioner looked them over.

"Yes; I think you are right. It is a well-marked handwriting. But what do you make of these broken lines?"

"Wait, sir. This paper has a quite remarkable history. It is better I should tell you that first, since that is one of the main sources of my suspicions."

He proceeded to tell the story which we have already told the reader, the commissioner listening with the deepest attention.

"Mercy on us! it is quite a romance," he ejaculated. "Everything but pistols and poison. I don't know when I have heard such a story in real life. I don't wonder you feel suspicious. And the Joe that took part in this—was he the former letter-carrier?"

"The same."

"Well! the plot thickens. And now, let us get back to the letter. I see some of your points. It contains the name of Joe Starling."

"Yes; and the following broken lines. 'You need fear noth—; 'have made no mist—; 'suppose they do—; 'can prove nothing.' Now, I should fill those lines out somewhat as follows: 'You need fear nothing from any carelessness on our part; 'we have made no mistakes, and will make none.' 'Suppose they do suspect something wrong, they can prove nothing.' 'Joe Starling is safe; his tongue is tied.' I take it from this that Jenkins was bribed to hold back our letter, and did it by this neat scheme with the aid of the letter-carrier. Jenkins may have heard something of our inquiries, which were renewed lately, have got nervous, and have written to Grip & Gorley to know if they had sufficiently covered up their tracks. This is part of their reply. Jenkins is in San Francisco now, and could communicate only by letter."

"It looks as if you were right, Mr. Burton," answered the commissioner. "Yet a court of law doesn't deal with theories, and, strong as your presumption is, the actual evidence you have to bring is really very little."

"Does it seem so to you?" inquired Mr. Burton, in a tone of disappointment.

"Yes. Look at the facts. The evidence of the wrong delivery of the letter cannot well be got over, if the carrier sticks to his story—which he will. You can only say then that the carrier was discharged for some looseness, that he got a position with Grip & Gorley, and that they wrote a letter to Jenkins with some doubtful half lines. Not a very strong case is this to sustain so grave a charge."

"Why did they try so hard to recover the letter?"

"That is suspicious—very suspicious—no doubt. You have strong presumptive evidence. But I doubt very much if you could get a verdict in your favor on this evidence. If Starling could be only got to confess—but there is little hope of that. Or, if you could obtain the missing half of this letter."

"I have thought of that, you may be sure," said Mr. Burton. "I have my two young scouts, Ned and Dick, on the track of that missing half. They will find it, if it is to be found. I have great confidence in them."

"You have reason for that. They seem to be thoroughly wide-awake. The young rascals appear to be a match for Grip himself, and he has no small reputation for sharpness."

"If they keep up to their record Grip will be distanced. I shall have some more adventures to tell you."

"Very likely. Very likely, indeed."

Ten minutes afterward, his business with the commissioner ended, Mr. Burton emerged on Chestnut street, and walked up that crowded thoroughfare. The look of hope that marked his face became doubt as he went on. It came into his mind that the chance of success in the boys' adventure was really very slight, and that he had been building highly on a very narrow foundation.

"Well, there's no use to get down-hearted," he said. "We'll be no worse off than before. It is not the money I care for, but I do want badly to squeeze those confounded rogues."

He turned toward the door of a restaurant, it being about his dinner hour.

"Hillo! Well, who'd 'spected to run afoul o' you along here!" came from a youthful voice behind him.

He turned to behold the intelligent and beaming face of Ned Norman.

"What! it is you, my boy!"

"I reckon 'tain't nobody shorter. Got some thin' to tell you, too. 'Tain't much, but it's somethin'."

"Come in here, then. Have you had dinner?"

"Nothin' but a bananner. But ain't that place too tony fer me?" looking down at his attire.

"No; you look respectable in the new suit which Mr. Grip was kind enough to buy for you," answered Mr. Burton, with a laugh.

"Come, we'll dine and talk at the same time."

Nothing loth, Ned followed. Selecting a table out of easy hearing of other guests, Mr. Burton gave his order.

"Now, Ned, while we're waiting, let me know what you have done."

Ned burst into a hearty laugh, which made several of the nearer guests turn their heads.

"It's jist prime the way Dick's been doin' it," he exclaimed, gayly. "Why, he's shoeblack general for all Grip & Gorley's. He brung his kit o' brushes over, and him and me laid it out that he was to play that dodge. He's took there, Dick has. He blacked up old Grip yesterday, and done half a dozen jobs in the store."

"Very good. Anything else?"

"Why, he got his eye on that waste basket. I set him up on that, you know, so he couldn't lose no time. The basket was empty. There weren't hardly nothin' in it."

"I see. Wait a minute. Here comes our dinner."

A waiter bustled up with an abundant display of dishes and hastened to deposit his freight of viands before his waiting guests. Ned kept quiet till he had finished and departed to fill some further order.

"Now you may go on," said Mr. Burton.

"There ain't much more; but what's left is the best, like pie and puddin' after dinner. Dick scraped hisself in with the store porter, as I told him, and got mighty curious to know what become of all their waste. He'd got a notion to go into business with an old paper man, he said, and was lookin' up jobs."

"A very good move in Dick."

"Couldn't have theirs, the porter said. Been sellin' to one old feller for years. The old chap come round every week with his bag and cleaned 'em out. He'd jist been there a day or two afore. He come every Wednesday."

"So; then our paper has been in his hands for more than a week. That looks bad."

"He moughtn't sell out till he gits a pile," suggested Ned. "Anyhow, Dick found out where the old feller's place is. Said he'd like to see him. Mought git a better offer from him than from t'other one. Cute in Dick, wasn't it?"

"Oh, Dick's a snoozer! I never seen a chap of his size that's got so much grit and brains. Couldn't done it better myself."

Mr. Burton laughed at the unconscious egotism of his young companion.

"You are going on very well," he said.

"Now finish your dinner, before it gets cold. We can end our talk afterward."

As may be imagined, Ned did not hesitate to obey this suggestion. Not another word, except some expressions of satisfaction, came from his lips till he had finished a profuse and very good meal, quite distancing Mr. Burton in the matter of appetite.

"Are you done, Ned? Will you have anything more?" he inquired.

"You can't put no more in a freight-car than it'll hold," answered Ned. "I reckon I'd best stop 'fore the roof busts off."

"Well, then, to business. Suppose you finish your story?"

"It's 'bout finished now. There's one thing I didn't tell you, though. Somebody from Grip's was up to where I live, axing all sorts o' questions 'bout me from granddad. Dunno what he wanted, 'cept to git hold o' me and put me out the way. But granddad ain't no fool, nary time, and the chap didn't git much 'cept tongue slack. I ain't stayin' home now, since I heerd that. 'Tain't safe."

"Perhaps not. You can't be too cautious."

"Me and Dick's going this afternoon down to the old paper man. He's out roundin' now, but he'll be in 'bout four or five o'clock. We want to look over his stock. Maybe he'll kick ag'in' it; but I reckon a five-dollar greenback'll fetch him."

"If it won't, make it ten, or even twenty. And take care not to let him know what you are after."

"Do you see anything green there?" queried Ned, pulling down his eyelid. "I ain't goin' to lie to him, but if Dick happens to stretch a bit, that's Dick's business. If I fork over lively I reckon that's all the old coon'll ax for."

"Very likely," answered Mr. Burton. "If Grip hasn't burnt that paper, and the paper-dealer has not sold out his stock, there may be some chance. I am staying at the Continental, Ned. You will find me in the vestibule there at ten to-morrow. Come there and report."

"I'll do that," answered Ned, rising and pushing back his chair. "Now I guess I best go hunt up Dick."

CHAPTER XII.

THE OLD PAPER DEALER.

It was a squalid and miserable-looking den in which old Jack Brownson, the waste-paper-dealer, dwelt and stored his accumulations. A tumble-down frame building, a century old, of which two small rooms served him for living, eating, and sleeping accommodations, while the remaining rooms were stored with the product of his daily rounds.

In the late afternoon of the day in which Ned had dined with Mr. Burton, he, with his confederate, Dick, might have been seen in the living room of this old fellow, who had recently entered from his daily round.

He was a wrinkled, grizzled, bent old chap, blind of one eye, and with stiffened and rheumatic joints. His bag, filled with the day's gatherings, served him as a rest, as he leaned back on an old settee.

"Well, youngsters," he queried, with a voice like a cracked fish-horn, "what yer want with old Jack, hey?"

"Why, us boys has got a queer notion in our heads, that's all," answered Ned.

"Yer ain't the fust boys I've see'd with a queer notion in the'r heads," rejoined the old fellow, with a cackling laugh. "Some of 'em git cracked notions."

"Me and Dick's on the make, we are," continued Ned. "Now, see here, Mr. Brownson—"

"None o' that now. Don't go the perlie on me. Call me old Jack, like everybody does, or else git. Don't b'lieve in no puttin' on airs."

"Don't you never hit on nothin' rich 'mong all them scraps which you pick up in stores? Money, or di'monds, or other things that's worth money?"

"What you arter, anyhow, young feller? S'pose I did, wouldn't I take it right back? Course I would. Anybody as says as old Jack ain't honest—" He completed his sentence with a blow from his fist upon the wall, as if to indicate what would happen to the questioner of his honesty.

Yet there was a crafty look in his wrinkled eyes that was, at the least, doubtful.

"But s'pose them papers got mixed, and nobody couldn't tell where they came from?" broke in Dick.

"That's a case as ain't come up. I allers wait fur cases to come up, 'fore I answer 'em."

"Tell yer what, old Jack, we ain't quite as b'ilin' over honest as you," continued Dick.

"Ain't yer? That's bad, boy. Sorry ter hear that." The old man shook his head gravely.

"And, what's more," broke in Ned, "we're on the make. What'll you take and let us go through your pile of old paper, us to keep all we find?"

"Jist so: findin's keepin's," added Dick.

"Wal, now," drawled old Jack, looking at them curiously, "ye're the fust boys as ever come that dodge. My, what cute boys ye are!"

"We've made some money, me and Dick has, and we want to make our pile bigger. So we jist set down and calculated chances, and we hit on the old paper dodge. See here, old Jack, we'll give you a dollar to go through your piles."

"And findin's keepin's," repeated Dick. The old man's eyes twinkled cunningly.

"Ever do this afore, youngsters?"

"Reckon we have," answered Dick, "but ain't struck ile yit. Kinder out of pocket, we are. But we're goin' ter keep her up till we come out square or hit a pile."

"Wal, yer can't go through my pile."

"We can't? Why?" asked Ned, disappointed.

"Not fur no dollar."

"Oh! how much do you want?"

"Lay down two dollars, and I mought talk."

"How's that, Dick? Pretty steep, isn't it?"

"Purty steep," echoed Dick, shaking his head.

"Don't play on us, old Jack. We ain't no capitalists."

"Jist think how many shines ther' is in two dollars. Why, it'd take a whole 'rithmetic to calkerlate them," remarked Dick.

"Two dollars. Nary a cent less."
 "S'pose we'd best go it, Dick?"
 "Ain't got no sich pile left, have we?"
 "Mought scrape up that much, maybe."
 "Let's go in then, and bu'st ourselves or make our pile."

"Here's the stuff," said Ned, taking the money from his pocket with great show of reluctance. "I tell you it's risky."

"You mought pick up a diamond bracelet or a hundred-dollar gold-piece or somethin'," responded the old man, eagerly clutching the bank-notes.

He was very sure they would find nothing of the kind, for he did not fail to thoroughly search every bag of waste he gathered for possible treasure.

"That's biz," cried Dick. "And findin's keepin's, mind. Guess we'd best peg in."

"How many weeks' pickings have you got on hand?" asked Ned.

"Bout two or three."

"That ought to make a big heap."

"Tain't a very little one."

"Then pat us on it."

"Wait a bit, boys. Ther's somebody ahead o' you. Ye're not ther only chaps as is on this lay."

"Come, now; that ain't square," ejaculated Dick.

"He ain't arter money. He's only arter a bit o' paper. Don't s'pose I'd play no game on two honest little boys? Yer don't know old Jack, yer don't. Wait; he's goin'."

He rose from his couch and hobbled from the room. A step was audible on the stairs outside. The voices of two men could next be heard. One of these seemed to rouse Dick as if a pin had been thrust into him. He sprang up and stole softly to the door, which had been left a crack ajar. He signaled knowingly to Ned as he passed.

The voices continued for a minute more. Then the front door opened. Dick stole back to Ned, with a look of deep meaning on his face.

"I couldn't only see his back," he said, "but I tell you he talks like Jake, the porter at Grip & Gorley's. Wonder what he's arter? Couldn't catch nothin' 'cept somethin' 'bout a paper."

"Paper?" cried Ned, starting up hastily.

"That's queer. Maybe we'd best foller him."

"Fell yer what, Ned: let me foller him, an' you go through the pile. If he's got it, it's too late to go back to ther store. I'll track him down, an' meet you at ther old place."

"Good! After him at once, afore he gets off."

Old Jack at this moment returned to the room. Dick hurried past him, and the next moment the front door was heard to slam loudly behind him. The old man looked suspiciously at the remaining boy.

"What ails him? Where's he gone?" he asked.

"He forgot something that he has to do, and he's got to hurry, or he'll be too late. I'll go ahead with the old paper while he's gone."

"None o' yer shenanigan," grumbled old Jack.

"I reckon it's you that's playin' on us," rejoined Ned, angrily. "I don't mind tellin' you that that's what took Dick. You sold us the right to everything that's in them old papers, and here's somebody goin' through 'em jist at that same minute. Dick's goin' to foller him an' see what he's got. If he's found anything you've got to hand back them two dollars. You can't play that game on us."

"Now, look yere, boy, yer don't think old Jack'd do that? I tell yer it was only a bit of paper he wanted."

"A bit o' paper? That's too thin!" cried Ned, scornfully. "What sort of a bit o' paper?"

"Why, as long's it's you I mought let you inter it," rejoined the old man, reseating himself, and leaning comfortably against his bag of paper. "Squat down, and I'll tell you. It's sorter queer, but ther'll be queer things sometimes."

Ned seated himself, eager to hear the old man's story, and hopeful that it would lead to something useful to himself.

"This man's a porter in a store," began old Jack. "Tain't no odds to you what store, 'cept that it's one o' my reg'lars. 'Bout a week ago I bought up their scrap, and fotched it home, and emptied it in my pile up-stairs. That same night this chap come down yere sorter nervous. He said ther were something loose up at the store. Wal, he picked out some o' the stuff and poked it away under a shelf, and axed me to keep it fur him. The old man'd been growlin' 'bout some waste outer his basket that oughtn't ter been took, he said,

and he didn't want ter git his head inter no hole."

"I see," said Ned, his eyes sparkling at this information. "And what brought him here to-night?"

"Ther's been somethin' of a row, I jedge. Anyhow, he come down ter look arter them papers, an' it's likely he tuk what he wanted."

Ned looked at the old fellow with an aspect of doubt. He had laid out in his mind the course to pursue.

"You don't reckon I'm goin' to swaller that mighty thin yarn?" he remarked.

"Lor! bless yer, boy! what'd I want ter humbug you fur? Come and see fur yerself."

He led the way to a room on the second floor, one side of which was occupied by a huge heap of waste-paper. Under a shelf on the other side was a small parcel which looked as if it had been torn asunder and scattered. Ned fell on his knees and rapidly ran his fingers through the heap. There was nothing there resembling the paper he sought.

"Is that what me and Dick elected to go through?" he asked, pointing to the great heap.

"Yes, and ther's more in ther next room."

"I ain't goin' to tackle that job 'bout Dick. It's too big a contract. Reckon I'll go hunt up Dick and fetch him back. He's arter that porter. Got any notion where he'll find him?"

"I calculate I could put my hand on him an' not half try," answered the old man, with his cackling laugh. "He won't go back to no store this night. Nor he won't go straight home, neither. Jake allers stops at Harry Hale's 'Half-way House.' He can't never git past there 'thout stoppin' fur his jorum of ale, and his crack over the glass."

"That's where I'll find Dick, then. I'll go after him, and we'll come back and try our luck. Where'bouts is Harry Hale's?"

"Lor! bless you, everybody knows that! Jist you go down Seventh to the second corner below. Then turn up toward Eighth, and you'll find it half-way in the square. Ax anybody round there."

"I'll find it," said Ned, confidently.

"And come back soon, if ye'r comin', 'cause 'tain't fur off from dark."

"All right," answered Ned, hurrying to the stairs with very little thought of coming back at all.

If what he had heard was to be trusted, there was no use to search old Jack's pile. Their game lay in another direction and must be run down quickly, or all was lost.

Leaving the house, Ned followed the directions given him, and was not long in discovering the establishment to which he had been directed. There stood out the sign:

"HALFWAY HOUSE; by Harry Hale,"

on the north side of a none too reputable street. He could hear the sound of voices and the rattle of glasses within the saloon.

The window was partly raised, and he looked in. At the bar stood a group of three or four men, who seemed somewhat boozy. Of the tables around the room only one was occupied, but the occupants of that brought a gleam of intelligence from Ned's eyes.

"Bully for Dick!" he said, to himself. "If he ain't cute, they don't make 'em."

This table was immediately under the window at which he stood. At one end of it sat Jake, the porter at Grip & Gorley's.

At the side, opposite him, sat Dick, hobnobbing with the porter. There were two glasses of ale and a brace of sandwiches on the table, and Dick seemed quite able to do his duty at both.

He was engaged in a lively talk with his friend, the porter.

"I tell you what—" he began.

He stopped with a quick start. He had at that instant caught sight of Ned's face at the window.

"What is the matter with you?"

"The mustard on them there sandwiches is too lively, that's all. I like things hot, but I don't like 'em red-hot."

Jake laughed heartily. At the same moment Ned made a meaning signal to his confederate.

"Your throat ain't case hardened yet, youngster," said Jake. "You'll be able to swallow boilin' brimstone in time. But, what was you goin' to tell me?"

"Jist that I don't back down for nobody. Maybeyou've got more in yer pocket nor I have, but I don't b'lieve no sich taffy, and I'll show up if you dare."

He drew a handful of small articles from one

pocket as he spoke and slammed them down on the table.

"The ale's gettin' into your head, boy," said Jake, still laughing.

"All right. You match them, and I'll fish up another lot."

Jake, amused at the challenge of the boy, and willing to try his mettle, thrust his hand into one pocket, and pulled out a knife, some bits of twine, and other small articles, which he laid beside Dick's.

"Come on," said Dick gleefully. "I'll make you dig deeper nor that."

The match was now fairly on, and in a little time the table was strewn with the contents of their pockets. Jake was too fully occupied to notice the face at the window, which was eagerly peering in at this game. Ned had taken the time, however, to pencil some hasty words on a piece of paper, which he held folded up in his hand. He saw through Dick's game and was waiting his chances.

The last pocket which Jake emptied contained nothing but a handkerchief and a torn sheet of paper, closely resembling that which Ned held in his hand. The onlooker's eyes now sparkled more brightly than ever.

Dick caught a look and a sign from his confederate. An awkward movement of his elbow swept a portion of Jake's articles from the table.

"There they go!" he cried; "catch 'em, Jake."

They both hastily stooped to the floor. The men at the counter looked around for an instant, then turned to their talk again. Had they looked longer, they would have seen a hand and arm dart hastily into the open window, seize the paper Jake had laid on the table and leave another folded the same way in its place, and as hastily withdraw. Dick, on rising, caught a look of triumph from his confederate, as Ned's face vanished from the window.

An hour afterward they met at their appointed rendezvous.

"What luck? Strike 'ile?" asked Dick eagerly.

"You bet. Did Jake suspect?"

"No. He rammed it back in his pocket. I tell you, we played that cute. Ther' ain't no flies on us, crony."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TWO HALVES OF THE LETTER.

"I HARDLY think that was judicious," said Grip to Gorley, as the two partners sat in their private office.

"Why not? It looked to me like a good move. If we get that back the game's in our own hands, and we can snap our fingers at Burton."

"It was as safe there as here. And you put Jake to suspecting something shady. He'll be sure to read it, too."

"He can make nothing out of it if he does. It takes the two halves to make a whole in this business as it does in most others. When Joe told me yesterday that Jake had said that he had got the old paper-man to lay our waste-paper aside, in case of inquiry, it made me a trifle nervous. Waste laid aside might fall into the wrong hands. I thought it best we should have the paper back in our own, so I described it to Jake and told him to go get it."

"You're losing your hold, old fellow," said Grip, shaking his head. "Your nerves are going back on you. Why, there was no more chance of that paper getting from the old man's truck into Burton's hands than there is for a man's jumping to the moon."

"I don't know about that. Queer things often happen. It is best in our own hands, anyway, as long as Burton has taken decided steps. By the way, it is pretty near the hour for the meeting before the commissioner, as arranged. Ten o'clock was the time fixed, you know."

"Where is Jake? He is three hours behind time this morning."

"He had an errand at Manayunk, and was told to go there before coming to the store. He should be back by this time."

He opened the door and called:

"Joe!"

Joe hurried up in response.

"See if the porter is here yet. If so, send him to the office."

Joe returned in a minute with the information that he had not yet put in an appearance.

"Very well. When he comes, send him to the United States Court rooms, over the post-office. Room Number 2. We will be there."

Come with him yourself, for fear he may not find the place."

"Very well, sir. I'll bring him."

Taking their hats the worthy pair left the office, and proceeded with an aspect of mercantile virtue and probity into the street. No one to look at them would have supposed them capable of doing anything out of the strictest line of business. Unluckily, looks do not always tell the truth.

Not many minutes afterward, Ned Norman, accompanied by his associate, Dick, entered the vestibule of the Continental Hotel. It was the hour at which he had appointed to meet Mr. Burton, yet that gentleman was nowhere visible.

"Where has he gone to?" queried Ned, with an air of disappointment. "Ten o'clock he said, and 'tain't more than five minutes after. That ain't business."

"I guess he's somewhere round the diggin's," suggested Dick. "Let's scout round a bit and we'll rake him out."

They tried the bar-room, the reading-room, the billiard-room, but no sign of Mr. Burton was to be seen.

"Maybe he thinks it's ten up to half-past," remarked Ned. "Let's sit down and wait a bit. I dunno as we're in no hurry."

Sitting and waiting, however, was too irksome a business for any one so active as Dick. Ten minutes gave him enough of that, and he bounced up with the exclamation:

"How d'ye know but he's left word with the clerk? That's what folks do when they've got 'gagements with gentlemen as they can't keep. I'm goin' to ax, anyhow."

He darted across to the clerk's desk, had some words with that important functionary, and returned with a folded slip of paper in his hand and a look of triumph on his face.

"Guess I didn't dig in fat that time! He's had ter go out, and has left a note fur you. Here 'tis; read it; my eddication stopped short o' readin' writin'."

Ned unfolded the slip and quickly made himself master of its contents.

"Mr. Burton is going to be at room Number Two, over the Post-office, to meet Grip & Gorley and talk things over. He axes me to come down there if I've got anything for him. If I ain't, I needn't come."

"Then I guess you'll go sailin' down there the straightest kind of a streak," rejoined Dick, with a meaning look. "If you and me ain't hit nothin' ther's no use talkin'. We ain't no slouches, nary time."

"Wait till old Grip opens that paper that Jake's a-takin' him. I'd give somethin' nice to see him when he peeps into it. If he don't dance, it'll be queer."

"You didn't wrap up no bumble-bee in it?"

"Maybe I didn't; but I put somethin' with a mighty sharp sting in it, now, you bet."

The boys had left the hotel and were proceeding to the point indicated.

Meanwhile the contestants were presenting the leading points of their case before the United States Commissioner, who had asked them to come to his office with the purpose of trying to settle their dispute by arbitration.

He was fully satisfied, from what Burton had told him, both that Grip & Gorley had been guilty of a rascally trick, and that Burton & Jones had no case that would stand in court. The evidence was good as far as it went, but it did not go far enough. That, at least, was his opinion. Under these circumstances he deemed it the duty of Burton to seek to arbitrate between them, and had proposed to do so.

The conversation between the contestants and the commissioner had proceeded about half an hour.

"Gentlemen," remarked the commissioner, at length, with some disappointment of tone, "you are of course aware that I have no authority in this matter as it stands to-day. I have only asked you to come here out of a pure desire to promote peace and harmony. If you refuse arbitration, there is nothing further for me to say. I can only remark to Mr. Burton that, however strongly the case may present itself to his mind, it will have no standing in court, and that a suit would be a useless expense to both parties."

"I am not so sure of that," answered Mr. Burton, decidedly. "Of course that is your opinion, Mr. Smith. But it is only an opinion, and I venture to match mine against it. The chapter of accidents, you know, is in my favor."

There was a look upon his face that attracted Mr. Grip's attention. He whispered to his partner:

"What does he mean?"

"Only bounce. Nothing else."

"We have no desire to fight," remarked Mr. Grip. "Not that we're afraid of a fight, for the whole affair is simply too ridiculous to be noticed. Our business standing is solid enough not to be hurt by anything that Mr. Burton can say or do. Still—"

He was interrupted at this point by the entrance of two persons into the room. They were his employes, Joe and Jake. The latter walked over to his employer and handed him a folded paper.

"This is the document you asked me to bring," he said.

A flash of triumph shot from Grip's eyes. The somewhat humble look he had assumed changed to one of haughtiness and hostility. He thrust the paper into his pocket, with a meaning look at his partner, and continued his remarks in a different tone. Evidently the possession of this paper had made him combative.

"Still, as I was about to say," he remarked, "I wish to give Messrs. Burton & Jones fair and full notice that if they want to fight, Grip & Gorley are ready to give them all the fight they can stomach. And what's more, if they should indulge in any libelous remarks about us, there will be a suit for damages in about the shortest time possible. We don't intend to stand their lying slanders."

"Those are my sentiments exactly," chimed in Gorley. "I quite agree with Mr. Grip."

Mr. Burton and the commissioner looked at the speakers in surprise. Their tone had changed remarkably since receiving the paper which had just been brought them. What bearing had this paper on the case? Could it be the missing half of the letter? Their sudden confidence indicated that such was the fact.

Mr. Burton, however, was not to be thrown off his track by bluster.

"Very well, gentlemen," he said. "You have your remedy, of course. It is quite probable I may talk. I am very willing that you should bring a suit for damages. Whether you will get them is quite another question. I think I can show, to the satisfaction of any court in the land, that you have played us an ugly trick. I will not say a criminal one, but you will allow me the privilege of thinking what I please."

"You had better not say it," cried Gorley, springing to his feet angrily. "If you do, I—"

"Well, what will you do?" rejoined Mr. Burton, rising and confronting him.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" exclaimed the commissioner, "no more of this, I beg you."

"Sit down, Gorley," cried Grip. "Don't play the fool. We will do our fighting by law, not with fists. Don't you see," he whispered, "that we hold the winning hand? Keep your temper, or you'll make mischief."

At this instant the door opened again and two more persons entered. They were our youthful friends Ned and Dick.

Ned cast his eyes curiously around the room, taking in all persons present. A look of significant meaning came into his eyes as they met the regard of Mr. Burton.

"What do you want, boys?" asked the commissioner.

"Jist a word or two with Mr. Burton," answered Ned.

Mr. Burton crossed to him, and a whispered conversation took place, Ned producing something from his pocket and placing it in the hands of the merchant. The latter opened what proved to be a closely-rolled and much-crumpled piece of paper, and quickly perused the lines of writing upon it. His eyes lit up as he did so with a veritable flash of triumph.

Grip watched this by-play with the keenest scrutiny. What to make of it he did not know. A moment's reflection, however, gave him an idea of what had occurred. Burton had talked much about the half-letter, but had not shown it. Was this it? Had he only now received it from the boy? Such must be the case, for he was very sure that his own fingers were at that moment touching the other half in his pocket.

Leaving the boys, Mr. Burton walked up to the commissioner.

"Read that," he said briefly, placing the paper in his hand.

Mr. Smith did so, his eyes opening wide with surprise.

"This quite alters the case," he exclaimed. "Gentlemen, I have no more to say. I remarked a while ago that Mr. Burton had no evidence that would stand in law. I withdraw that remark. The half-letter is a whole letter now, and I strongly advise him to bring suit."

"What do you mean?" cried Grip, hotly.

"Let me see that paper!"

"It is placed in my charge. I cannot show it to anybody without Mr. Burton's consent."

"You say the half-letter is a whole letter. I challenge that assertion. What you have there is a forgery got up to injure us. I can prove that very quickly, for I happen to have the missing half of the letter in my pocket."

He produced his supposed prize and waved it triumphantly in the air.

"I don't know what you have there. But see here; do you recognize this handwriting? Is this signature known to you?"

Mr. Burton took the letter from the commissioner's hand, and held it before Grip's face.

The latter turned deathly pale and staggered back. Then he hastily drew from his pocket the sheet he had just received, opened it out, and quickly perused it.

His pallor was succeeded by a red flush of fury.

"Perdition!" he cried. "That boy! By all that's good, I'll strangle him!"

The paper fell from his hands as he made a wild rush for Ned, who was keenly watching him, and who as quickly flung open the door and fled from the room.

The infuriated merchant followed, while Dick came close upon his heels.

The others ran to the door. It was quickly evident that no harm was likely to come to Ned. He had reached the stairs and was flying down them two steps to Grip's one.

"What is in this paper to make such a scene?" remarked Mr. Smith, picking the sheet from the floor, and running his eyes over its contents.

"Read it out," cried Burton.

"It is a curious document. I don't understand it, nor the effect it had. This is what it says:

"'Sold! Guess I'm even with you for pilin' them bricks. Next time you hire a boy for a job, pay him.'"

"What does this mean, Mr. Gorley?"

"It means that I'll help Grip to kill that infernal boy!" yelled Gorley, in a violent outburst of passion, as he rushed from the room after his partner.

"Come, Mr. Burton, we had better be in at the death," cried Mr. Smith, following with all haste.

In a moment the room was empty. If it had been Ned's purpose to create a sensation, he had certainly succeeded.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END OF THE GAME.

THE fleeing boy was not so safe as he anticipated. At the foot of the stairs he stumbled and fell. Before he could scramble to his feet again his foe was close upon him, with a face blazing with murderous fury.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" he hissed between his set teeth. For the moment he was full of tigerish rage.

It would have gone hard with Ned but that he had a friend at hand. Dick had nimbly followed the flying pair, and was at this instant close upon Grip's heels. Seeing Ned's danger, and hearing the exclamation of his infuriated pursuer, Dick felt that there must be something done, and that he must do it.

With a leap like that of a hound, the agile youngster sprang from the stair-step upon which he stood, and lit between Grip's shoulders just as he was reaching out to grasp Ned, who was scrambling to his feet.

The impetus, added to his former speed, sent Grip flying headlong forward, with such force that his head struck like a cannon-ball against the opposite wall. Down he came, stunned and helpless.

Dick lit on his feet like a cat, and with an elfish laugh, he cried:

"Come ahead, crony! Let's git! I've salted his hide, but Gorley's a-comin'. I dunno what you writ, but two madder men than them is I never see'd."

Away they went, down a second flight, and to the street below.

When the remainder of the party reached the scene of this incident, the boys had vanished, and all they saw was the prostrate form of the defeated pursuer, stretched motionless, and seemingly lifeless, upon the floor.

He was not dead, however, as was soon proved, for he quickly recovered, and withdrew in a sadly-discomfited state with his partner, while Mr. Burton and the commissioner returned to the room of the latter.

What followed may be more briefly told. An hour afterward Mr. Burton returned to the

hotel. At the door he beheld the two boys, apparently waiting for him, and with faces full of gleeful triumph.

"Good!" he said. "I wanted to see you. Come to my room. I would like to know how you did it. There's a mystery I can't make out."

"'Bout that paper Grip had?"

"Yes. It is the very paper I gave you to measure with. What have you been doing? What does it all mean?"

"It means jist the cutest trick ever you heerd tell of," exclaimed Ned, bursting into a hearty laugh. "I wonder if old Grip wants any more bricks piled? Got my pay for the fu'st job, but it took hard squeezin'."

"I doubt if he will hire you again, or for the same wages," rejoined Mr. Burton, pleasantly.

Taking the elevator, they proceeded to his room.

"Tell me all about it now," he said, when they were seated.

The boys proceeded, with much glee, to describe their recent adventures, Mr. Burton listening with the most earnest attention, and many expressions of approval.

"There is something I can't quite make clear," he remarked. "How came the porter to be searching for that paper?"

"I kin tell you," responded Dick, eagerly.

"He blabbed ther whole biz to me. It's jist 'bout this size: Arter he guv Ned that paper I reckon ther' was a kinder row 'tween Grip & Gorley, and they wanted ter burn t'other half. But ther' weren't nothin' in ther basket, fur Jake had jist cleaned out and sold all ther old paper. They cussed a little, I guess, and Joe told Jake 'bout the row, so Jake went down ter old Jack's and picked out them papers and axed him ter save 'em, 'cause how ther' were a kick-up 'bout 'em. Yisterday ther' was some more slack, and Jake told Gorley as ther papers was all right. Then Gorley told Jake what sorter paper he wanted, and sent him down arter it. That's how Jake cum' there," concluded Dick, finishing the longest speech he had made in his life.

"It looks as if the hand of Providence were in it," rejoined Mr. Burton. "It is a remarkable chapter of accidents. But go on. I have yet to learn the best of the story; how you managed to get the treasure out of Jake's pocket, and get your decoy paper in."

"My eyes, but that was cute," laughed Dick. "Ned done that, and Ned's mighty spry, now, you bet!"

"We done it together, is my notion," rejoined Ned. "It took us both; but we did rub it in lively on Jake, that's sure."

He continued with his interrupted story, relating how Dick had challenged Jake to a "show up" of the contents of their respective pockets, and how he, seeing the opportunity offered him, had exchanged the papers, first writing on his the words which had so excited the wrath of the humbugged Grip.

"And Jake never melted to it," broke in Dick. "He beat me in the show-up. He had more in his pockets nor I had. He got the laugh on me when he rammed ther stuff back. He didn't twig nothin', he didn't. You bet I were laughin', too, but 'twas inside."

Dick laughed heartily "outside" at the recollection. A few words more sufficed to finish the story, and to put Mr. Burton in possession of all the facts of the case.

At the end of their conversation Mr. Burton opened his pocketbook, extracted a twenty-dollar bill, and laid it on the table.

"This will pay your expenses," he said.

Ned opened his eyes widely.

"Why, Mr. Burton, we only spent two dollars," he exclaimed, though Dick was punching him vigorously to make him hold his tongue.

"Expenses and wages, I should have said," rejoined the merchant. "You have been working for me for a week past. I don't expect you to work for nothing. Take this and enjoy yourselves for a while. You've earned some enjoyment. When you get tired come to my store in New York, and I will have some further talk with you. I am going back by an early train this afternoon, as I have finished the business that brought me to Philadelphia. Finished it very favorably," he continued, with a significant smile. "And now, as I presume you are hungry from your morning's work, come down to the dining-room and we will have something to eat."

It need not be said that the boys made no objection to this invitation. They knew what it was to be hungry about as well as they knew anything.

During the succeeding week or two Ned and Dick had a lively time. The former was doing

the honors of Philadelphia, as the latter had formerly done of New York, and there was little worth seeing that they did not manage to see.

The twenty-dollar bill was expended in tickets to theaters, base-ball grounds, horse-car fares, restaurant meals, and the like, and at the end of a week they had begun to draw on their former capital to keep up the fun.

"I reckon we're gittin' 'bout to the end of our gay blow-out," decided Ned, at length. "Granddad says we're a pair o' young colts that wants the curb, and I judge granddad's 'bout right. I guv him my money to keep, and he won't shell out any more. I'm wastin' it, he says."

"I got some yit," announced Dick. "I wasn't fool enough ter guv it to nobody."

"You'd better done it," rejoined Ned, severely. "Jist pull up an' keep what you've got. We've been doin' this thing long enough. Let's haul in our horns and dig out for New York."

"Fur Burton & Jones's?"

"Yes."

"I'm handy. Dunno but that's 'bout the dodge."

Two days afterward the pair of young adventurers entered the store of Burton & Jones, on William street, New York. With their accustomed independence they made their way back to the office, where they were fortunate enough to find Mr. Burton.

"So you've done sowing your wild oats, youngsters," he said, after a cordial greeting. "What have you next in view? What can I do for you?"

"Why, first thing, you owe me a thousand dollars, which I was to have for that bit o' letter paper," answered Ned.

"A thousand dollars! Come, come, boy, you're dreaming."

"I ain't one o' the sort as dream with their eyes open," answered Ned, firmly. "You made the offer square up. I didn't ax it, and I ain't goin' to let down on it."

Dick pinched Ned's knee approvingly.

"Nonsense, youngster; that was only a joke. I promised you a position in the store."

"I don't want no position in the store."

"You don't? I thought you wanted it badly."

"Nor I don't want none, neither," chimed in Dick.

"Well, you seem to be an independent pair of young men."

"I don't want no position in *your* store, I mean," continued Ned, with a look of deep indignation in his face. "I'm square up, I am, and I don't want nothin' to do with folks as ain't square up."

"Them's my notions, too," echoed Dick.

"Maybe you'll wish you'd planked down the thousand afore you're done," persisted Ned, earnestly. "Mr. Grip wouldn't pay me my hundred dollars for carrying bricks, and I guess now he wished he had. That's all I've got to say. Come, Dick!"

He rose and walked toward the door, followed by Dick, who cast a reproachful look upon Mr. Burton as he passed.

The merchant responded with a burst of genial laughter. It was so loud and hearty, indeed, that the indignant boys paused and looked around in surprise.

"Well, you're business to the backbone, I see," remarked Mr. Burton, gayly. "I'm glad to find that out. I want everybody in this establishment to be sound, solid, and square. Sit down again, if you can forgive me, for a few minutes. I have a pleasant story to tell you. You have had your turn at story-telling, you know; now it is my turn."

The boys, astonished at these remarks, took their seats again and listened.

What Mr. Burton told them at some length, we may give in brief. It was to the effect that Grip & Gorley had been scared into a settlement. Suit had been brought, and Joe, the former letter-carrier, had been questioned so sharply that he broke down and let some more of the cat out of the bag. Jenkins was also looked after. The affair, in fact, was becoming so blue for Grip & Gorley that they offered to compromise, and that very day a settlement had been effected, by which they had agreed to pay three thousand hush-money, if Burton & Jones would agree to withdraw the suit, and return the letter which they held as evidence.

"We have accepted," said Mr. Burton.

"That is probably as much as we would have made out of the contract, if we count court and lawyers' expenses in addition. Not quite as much, however, for I owe you a thousand for your very valuable services in the affair," with a significant look at Ned.

"You mean it this time?" queried Ned. "Solid? No game back of it?"

"I mean every word of it."

"Then I reckon I won't mind takin' that job in the store."

"And I'll hire you, too, if you'll shell out as much as I kin make at shinin' shoe-leather," Dick chimed in.

Mr. Burton laughed gayly, again.

"So you'll both take me on and try me," he remarked. "I'll have to keep up to the mark, I suppose, if I don't want to be discharged by you high-strung young gentlemen. However, we'll call it a bargain."

A week from that date the two boys were regularly installed in the establishment of Burton & Jones. They took hold with a vim that promised good results. Ned brought his grandfather over from Philadelphia, started a home in New York with Dick for one of its inmates, and put the money he had earned in the hands of his employers for investment. It amounted, after his spendings, to fourteen hundred dollars.

A year from that date Ned started out as a traveling salesman, while Dick was advanced to the position of indoor salesman. And so we leave them, both making their way in the world, and settling down to the steady level of promising business men.

THE END.

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